▸ Places in Rome

Tracing the history of the Church

in the footsteps of

St Josemaria

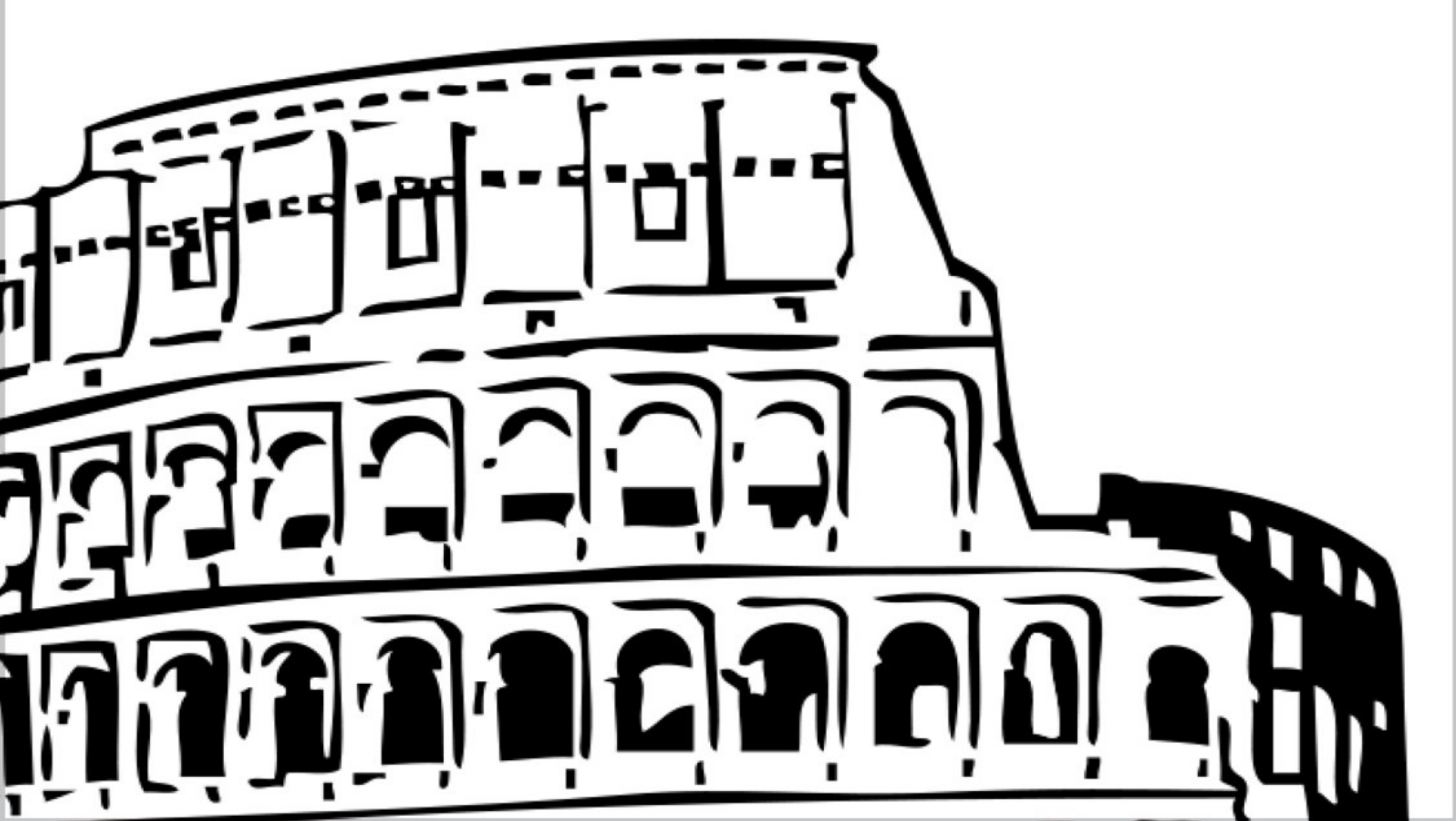


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Preface

St Josemaria is a good guide to the many places in Rome that he himself visited to draw faith from the witness of the early Christians:

– The Catacombs of St Callixtus

– The Holy Cross in Jerusalem

– The Roman Forum

– The Colosseum

– The Via Appia

– The Memory of St Paul

– Little Shrines to Our Lady

– St John Lateran

The description will follow in St Josemaria's footsteps, so that his teachings can help draw the maximum fruit from this tour. For Catholics, Rome is not just a city of great artistic and historical significance, but something much more: it is home, a return to their roots, the setting of the marvelous story of the infinite Love of God, who wants to reach all mankind. The history of Rome will always be a present, living thing, and at the beginning of the third millennium it takes on particular relevance, as the children of the Church face up to the challenge of a new evangelization.

June 23, 2006 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the day the founder of Opus Dei arrived in Rome. This anniversary highlighted many aspects of St Josemaria's life: his self-abandonment into God's hands; his heroic fortitude in fulfilling God's Will; his trust in the Church and his love for the Pope; his dreams of expanding the apostolate in the face of all the odds; his desire to "Romanize" Opus Dei, giving it a universal, Catholic heart in union with Peter, the visible center of the unity of the Church.

St Josemaria was once asked when he first thought of traveling to Rome, and his reply was both concise and revealing. "I'd never thought of coming to Rome," he said. "But I had to come, because Opus Dei was born Roman." (1) On other occasions he spoke in more detail about the meaning of the Church's "Roman-ness", in which Opus Dei shares. "For me, "Roman" is synonymous with Catholic, Ecumenical and Universal," (2) he said in 1964. A few years later, he wrote: "I venerate with all my strength the Rome of Peter and Paul, bathed in the blood of martyrs, the center from which so many have set out to propagate throughout the world the saving word of Christ. To be Roman does not entail any manifestation of provincialism, but rather of authentic ecumenism. It presupposes the desire to enlarge the heart, to open it to all men with the redemptive zeal of Christ, who seeks all men and takes in all men, for he has loved all men first." (3)

Christ's Church is Roman because, through divine Providence, the first Bishop of Rome was St Peter, the source of unity and guarantee of the faithful transmission of the deposit of revealed truth. It is quite natural, therefore, for Catholics to wish to become more and more "Roman", so that what St Josemaria said to some of his children who had recently arrived in Rome should come true in their lives too. He said, "Rome will

leave a deep and lasting mark on your souls, if you take advantage of your time here. And it will teach you to be more faithful children of the Church and to have a more supernatural love for the Holy Father.” (4)

Notes

1. St Josemaria Escriva, General Archive of the Opus Dei Prelature (AGP) P01, 1968, p. 224.

2. St Josemaria Escriva, AGP, P01, II-1964, p. 17.

3. St Josemaria Escriva, homily "Loyalty to the Church", June 4, 1972, published in *In Love with the Church*, Scepter Publishers, p.13**.**

4. St Josemaria Escriva, AGP, P01, 1973, p. 283.

1. St Peter's Basilica

St Peter was martyred during the persecution of Christians that took place under Nero following the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. St Peter had come to Rome a few years earlier, following our Lord's command as recorded in St Mark's Gospel: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." (1)

The Christians in Rome must have regarded Peter with special veneration. He had been the first to proclaim our Lord's divinity; he had traveled with him for the three years of his public life and had received from the Master the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. He was the visible head of the Church, and his presence in the capital of the Roman Empire made Rome the center and heart of the growing Christian Church.

When the persecution began, the first Pope understood that the time was approaching for the fulfillment of the prophecy that Jesus had made by the shores of Lake Tiberias. The scene described by St John was ever fresh in his memory:

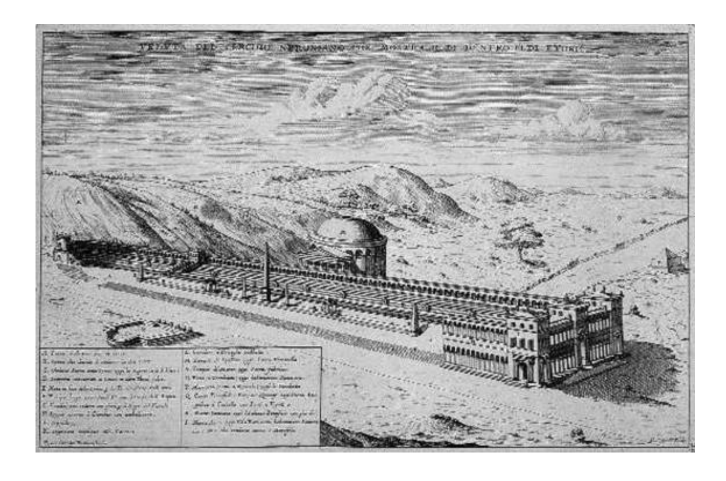
“Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Truly, truly I say to you, when you

were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.' This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God. And after this he said to him, 'Follow me." (2)

A lifetime spent in the service of the Church

After a lifetime spent in the service of the Church, the time had come for Peter to follow Christ to the point of total identification with him. Very soon he was arrested and condemned to die by crucifixion; and he was crucified upside down, because in his humility he felt he was not worthy to die in the same way as our Lord.

The site of his martyrdom was probably the horti Neronis (Nero's gardens), a piece of land belonging to the emperor on the outskirts of ancient Rome, close to the Vatican Hill. Caligula had begun to build a circus there for his own entertainment, and this was continued by Claudius and completed in the time of Nero. St Peter may have been executed during one of the spectacles organized there. Nero sometimes opened the gates of his stadium to the inhabitants of Rome, and he himself would drive his chariot around it dressed as a charioteer, to the applause of the crowd. The historian Tacitus has left us a graphic testimony of the way such spectacles were celebrated during the persecution of Christians. "Their deaths were treated as a sport. They were wrapped in the skins of beasts and savaged to death by dogs, or they were nailed to crosses, or, at nightfall, they were burnt alive as torches to light up the darkness." (3).



View of the Vatican stadium, after an engraving by Carlo Fontana, 1694.

A tomb in the bare earth

The Christians retrieved St Peter's dead body and buried it on the slopes of the Vatican Hill, close to Nero's Circus but outside his property. The tomb was dug in the bare earth, but from the first it was visited frequently by the Christians of Rome. The emotion they felt on recalling Peter's fruitful apostolate in Rome may easily be imagined. According to ancient traditions Peter had lodged on the Esquiline Hill, in the house of a Senator called Pudens, which was one of the first *"domus Ecclesiae"* – house-Churches – in Rome, and it was on this site that the Basilica of St Pudentiana was later built. St Peter must also have been a frequent visitor at the house of Aquila and Priscilla, the husband and wife who worked with St Paul and whom he mentions in his Letters. They lived on the Aventine Hill, where the small Church of St Prisca stands today.

The early Christians must have offered many prayers and petitions at St Peter's tomb, for fortitude in the Faith, a big heart to love Jesus as he did, and courage to keep beginning again from the beginnings. In their trials, they must also have been greatly helped by meditating on the episode of St Peter's denials, his repentance, and the thrice-repeated question, *"Simon, do you love me?"* with which our Lord entrusted to him the care of his Church. (4)

On this rock I will build my Church

It was natural for this veneration to be shown by enriching St Peter's tomb. As far back as the second century, a simple monument had been built over the original grave. Nor did the Christians of that era forget the words that our Lord had addressed to the apostle Simon, giving him his new name and new mission: **"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it."** (5).

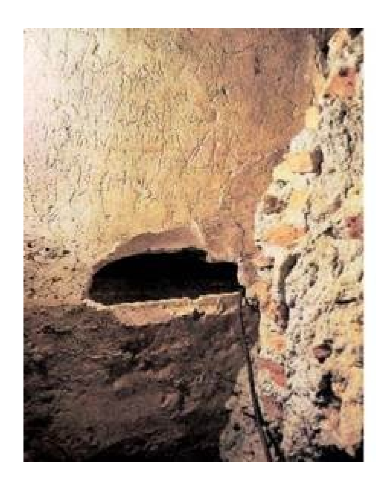
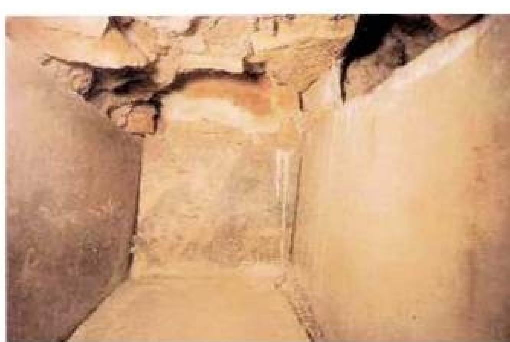
Tradition says that the altar of Constantine's Basilica of St Peter was built in the fourth century over the site of Peter's tomb, and exactly above that, surrounding and protecting the previous ones, were constructed the altars built successively by St Gregory the Great and Callistus II in the sixth and twelfth centuries respectively. Finally, when Pope Clement VIII

had the present Altar of the Confession built in 1594, it was once again designed to cover the preceding ones.

Archeological excavations

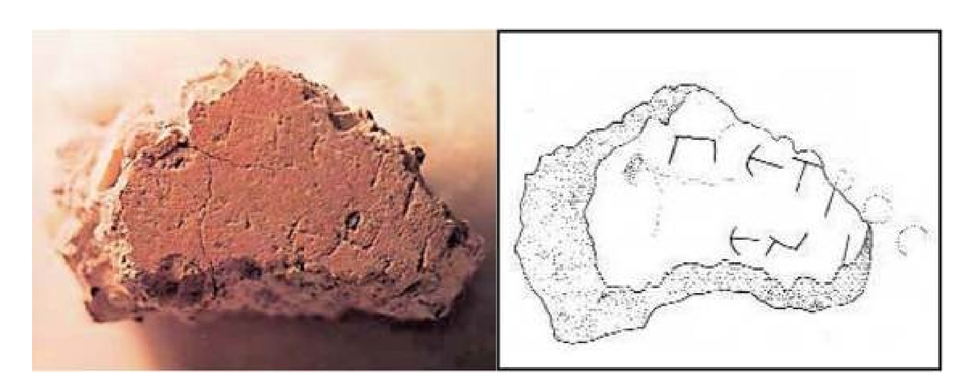
For many centuries, pilgrims who came to Rome from all over the world were led by their faith and their reliance on this tradition to venerate the memory of the Prince of the Apostles in his Basilica, as the site of his tomb. Now, thanks to the archeological excavations carried out in the mid-twentieth century by the wish of Pope Pius XII, it is possible to go and pray before the tomb of St Peter itself.

These excavations served to confirm, point by point, the information that had been handed down by tradition. They uncovered Nero’s Circus, a necropolis containing both pagan and Christian tombs, in an excellent state of preservation, and, most important of all, the humble monument dedicated to St Peter, which corresponded with the most ancient descriptions of it and which was indeed discovered immediately beneath the successive main altars of the Basilica. It was also found that this tomb was surrounded by many others, all dug closely around it as though to get as near to the central one as possible. An enormously revealing study was made of the graffiti, or inscriptions, found on the wall, because they showed clearly that this spot had been where Christians gathered for worship, and they included many acclamations of St Peter.

The Graffiti Wall. Through the opening made during the excavations can be seen Constantine's marble tomb.

One of these inscriptions was engraved next to a small loculus or opening in the wall. This niche contained the bones of an elderly but robust man, which had at some stage been wrapped in a purple cloth with gold threads. The Greek inscription next to the niche read PETROS ENI, – “Peter is here”.



Fragment of the Graffiti Wall showing the inscription "Petros eni".

At St Peter’s Tomb

“Peter is here.” On arriving in Rome for the first time, how the Founder of Opus Dei must have longed to go into St Peter’s Basilica to pray before the tomb of St Peter! He spent the whole of his first night in Rome praying on the balcony of the apartment where he was staying with other people of Opus Dei, in the Piazza della Città Leonina, with his eyes fixed on the lighted rooms of the Holy Father in the Vatican nearby. The following day was June 24, 1946, which he dedicated entirely to working on the canonical solution for Opus Dei, which was his main reason for coming to Rome. Before embarking, he had placed this intention in our Lady’s hands, traveling to the shrines of Pilar, Montserrat, and La Merced, in Barcelona. “We had to open up a new path in the Church, and the obstacles seemed insuperable,” he recalled in 1966. (6)

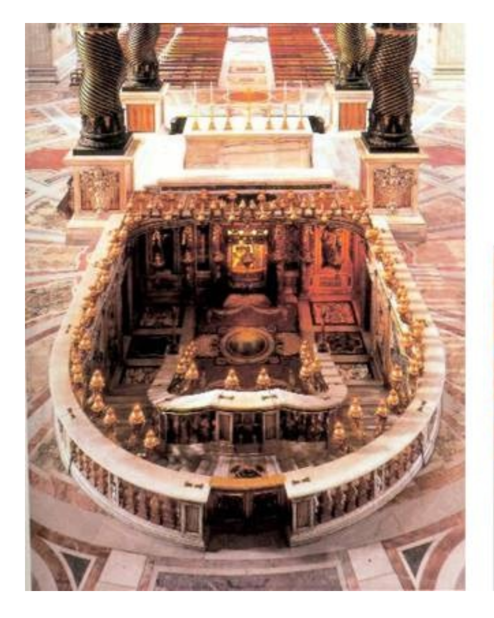
The founder of Opus Dei spent the whole of June 24 without leaving the apartment. Early in the morning he celebrated Mass on an altar which had been set up provisionally in the vestibule of the apartment, since the oratory was not yet ready. The rest of the day was filled with intense work with Don Alvaro del Portillo, his closest collaborator and afterwards his

successor at the head of Opus Dei. St Josemaria decided to put off his visit to St Peter's, and to offer the delay as a sacrifice, one which cost him a lot, since from his early youth he had desired ardently to pray before the tomb of St Peter.

St Josemaria finally went to St Peter's in the morning of June 25. He walked in silence through St Peter's Square and into the Basilica, up to the Altar of the Confession, under which lie the remains of the Prince of the Apostles. There he stopped for a long moment of prayer. Only after this did he take time to look at the splendor of the Basilica. The content of his prayer is not known, but it may be supposed that he renewed the profession of faith by saying the Creed, as he always advised visitors to St Peter's to do, and also reaffirmed his unshakable confidence in and fidelity to the Pope and the Church.

Tour of the Basilica

In the almost thirty years he spent in Rome until his death, St Josemaria often went back to St Peter's to pray. He did not always follow the same route round the Basilica, although he did acquire the custom of stopping at certain fixed points. The first thing he did, as on entering any church, was to go to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel to greet our Lord in the Tabernacle, and make a spiritual communion. In St Peter's, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel is on the right-hand nave, halfway between the main entrance and the Altar of the Confession. The Blessed Sacrament was reserved in a monumental Tabernacle designed by Bernini, with a sculptured angel on each side adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

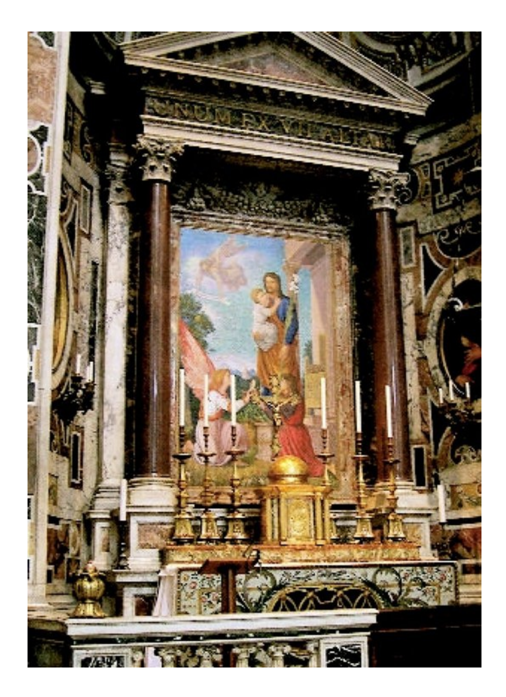
 

The present Altar of the Confession is constructed over the ancient tombs raised over the mortal remains of St Peter the Apostle.

Since the time of Pope John Paul II the Blessed Sacrament is perpetually exposed. There is a second Tabernacle in the Chapel of St Joseph, dedicated by Pope John XXIII in 1963, at the very end of the left transept. St Josemaria also sometimes went there to pray before the painting of St Joseph, which shows him as a young man, holding the Child Jesus in his arms.



Blessed Sacrament Chapel.



The Chapel of St Joseph, left transept.

After that, St Josemaria would unfailingly go and greet our Lady: he normally did this before the icon of the Madonna del Soccorso, Our Lady of Succor. This chapel is in the right nave, past the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, and the eleventh-century icon was already in place in the earlier Basilica.





Eleventh-century icon of Our Lady of Succor in the right-hand nave. St

Josemaria would frequently pause in prayer before this icon.

Naturally, St Josemaria invariably went to the Altar of the Confession, at the central point of the main nave and transepts. There he usually said a Creed, savoring the words. Beneath the altar lies the Confession, designed by Maderno, where ninety-nine votive lamps burn constantly, marking the resting-place of St Peter just a few meters beneath. From the balustrade the Niche of the Pallia may be seen, so called because it holds a chest containing the woolen pallia given by the Pope to Archbishops as a sign of unity with the See of Peter. Over the altar rises Bernini's majestic baldacchino: a work of notable grandeur, designed to help the faithful to raise their hearts magnanimously to the Lord.

Another place which St Josemaria made a point of visiting was the tomb of St Pius X, whose mortal remains rest in a casket under the altar in the Chapel of the Presentation, in the left-hand nave. They were finally placed there in 1952, although from 1945 to 1951, the year he was beatified, his body rested in this same Chapel, in the provisional place provided for deceased Popes. St Josemaria evinced great devotion to St Pius X, whom he made one of Opus Dei's intercessors, entrusting him with the relations of the Work and its faithful with the Holy See.

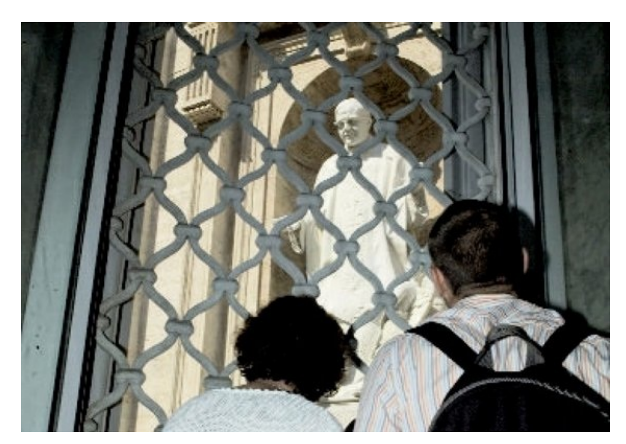


The tomb of St Pius X in the Chapel of the Presentation.

Since September 14, 2005

There is another part of St Peter's that has been visited by many of the

faithful, Cooperators and friends of Opus Dei since September 14, 2005. In the left-hand nave, past the monument to St Pius X, is the entrance to the great Sacristy of St Peter's. The windows of the passage leading to the sacristy look out on a statue of St Josemaria, placed in a large niche on the outer wall of the Basilica. Pausing to contemplate his welcoming gesture is the perfect moment to pray to him to increase all the Christian faithful's love for the Church and the Pope.



The statue of the founder of Opus Dei can be seen from one of the windows.

Notes

1. Mark 16:15-16.
2. John 21:17-19.
3. Tacitus, *Annales XV.*
4. Cf. John 21:15-17.
5. Matthew 16:18.
6. St Josemaria, *General Archive of the Opus Dei Prelature* (AGP) P18, p. 313.

2. St Peter's Square

The majestic façade of St Peter's Basilica was completed in 1614, when

the thirteen statues of the risen Christ, St John the Baptist, and eleven Apostles were placed on the balustrade surmounting the edifice. The square in front of it, however, did not yet have its final form. The buildings around the Basilica were of many different kinds, and the space in front was not laid out so as to provide a fitting welcome for people who came to venerate the tomb of St Peter.

In addition, there was no protection from either the sun or the rain, so that for solemn ceremonies covered passageways had to be erected from the apostolic palace to the Basilica. For all of these reasons, Pope Alexander VII resolved from the start of his pontificate to create a more suitable and functional approach to St Peter’s Basilica.

The project of designing the square was entrusted to Bernini, who worked hard on it from 1656 to 1657. The result is the marvel that is to be seen today. Bernini himself explained that the two semi-ovals formed by the two hundred and eighty-four pillars were intended to symbolize the arms of Mother Church embracing all mankind.



Possibly Bernini never imagined that one day St Peter’s Square would prove too small to hold the huge number of faithful who gather to pray, or to attend a liturgical celebration, the proclamation of a dogma, or the canonization of a saint, in union with the Pope. The unforgettable images of the crowds that came for the beatification and canonization of St

Josemaria, the last moments of the life of Pope John Paul II with hundreds of thousands of people saying the Rosary for the Pope, and the massive show of unity around the election of Pope Benedict XVI, have made St Peter's Square into a living illustration of St Josemaria's words: "All with Peter to Jesus through Mary! By seeing ourselves as part of the Church and united to our brothers in the faith, we understand more deeply that we are brothers of all mankind, for the Church has been sent to all the peoples of the earth." (1).

A life of service to the Church

June 25, 1946, was the day St Josemaria first set foot in St Peter's Square. He walked through it deep in prayer, savoring in God's presence the moments leading up to the fulfillment of a lifelong dream: to pray at the tomb of St Peter.

From that day onwards, during the twenty-nine years he lived in Rome, the Founder of Opus Dei often went to pray in front of the Vatican Basilica and the papal apartments. When he was going somewhere in Rome, he tried whenever possible to go past St Peter's, and from the edge of the square, without getting out of the car, he would pray a Creed for the Church and the Pope. Don Alvaro del Portillo once said that St Josemaria used to add in a few words. When he got to the part "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church," he would say three times over, "I believe in my Mother the Roman Church," and then add, "in spite of everything". He once confided this custom of his to Msgr. Tardini, who worked for many years as Cardinal Secretary of State at the Vatican. Tardini asked him what the expression meant. "I mean in spite of my failings and yours," replied St Josemaria. (2)

Don Alvaro explained, in talking of this episode, that St Josemaria wished to emphasize "the need for those who assist the Pope to be very holy and filled with the Holy Spirit, in order that there can be more holiness throughout the Church." (3) He was motivated by his love for the Church, a love that he passed on to his children throughout his life and that was endorsed for all to hear on October 6, 2002. "All with Peter to Jesus through Mary! To take all souls to Jesus through the mediation of our Blessed Lady, in union with the Successor of Peter and Head of the Church on earth, and with all the Bishops in the world: this was the deepest aspiration of St Josemaria Escriva, whom the Holy Father John

Paul II has solemnly added to the list of canonized saints." (4) The packed congregations at the Masses celebrated on October 6 and 7 that year were like a graphic answer to St Josemaria's wish. St Peter's Square became the perfect setting that visually symbolized the aspiration "All with Peter to Jesus through Mary!"

"The sweet Christ on earth"

In our times, any visitor to Rome who wishes to see the Pope goes to St Peter's Square. The Sunday Angelus – a custom instituted by Pope John Paul II – , the Wednesday audiences, and the many liturgical celebrations, draw more and more people who come videre Petrum – to see Peter (Galatians 1:18).

"The Catholic Church is Roman. I savor that word, Roman! I feel completely Roman, since Roman means universal, catholic. And it leads me to have a tender love for the Pope, il dolce Cristo in terra – the sweet Christ on earth, as Saint Catherine of Siena, whom I count as a most beloved friend, liked to repeat." (5) It is easy for everyone who comes to the square to see the Pope at some moment: standing at the balcony of the papal apartments, in the sanctuary of the Basilica, or being driven round by car to greet those present. And while the crowds are ever-changing, there is one witness that, although dumb, has held a privileged position in the square for centuries: the enormous obelisk standing in the center of the square, which for almost two thousand years has watched some of the most important events in the history of the Church unfold, beginning with the martyrdom of St Peter.

The obelisk dates from the twentieth century BC, and was set up in the ancient Egyptian city of Heliopolis in honor of the sun, in the time of the Pharaoh Amenemhet II. It was brought to Rome on the orders of the Emperor Caligula in the year 40 AD, and the story is told that in order to transport the obelisk without damaging it, it was carried in a ship packed with lentils. It was placed in the center of the Circus of Caligula, which afterwards became the Circus of Nero, a few meters to the left of the walls of the present Vatican Basilica. It was there that St Peter was martyred, and his holy body was buried close by. In 1586, Pope Sixtus V had the obelisk moved to the central point in St Peter's Square. Preparations for moving it took six months, and the actual task involved nine hundred and seven men and seventy-five horses. At the top of the

obelisk a cross was placed, whose base contains a fragment of wood from the True Cross.

Mater Ecclesiae

St Peter’s Square was completed gradually, through several centuries. In 1613, Pope Paul V commissioned Maderno to construct a fountain to one side of the obelisk. In 1670, Carlo Fontana made an exactly similar one on the other side, restoring symmetry. As well as the statues of Christ and the Apostles above the main front of St Peter’s Basilica, one hundred and forty statues of saints were set above the two colonnades between 1662 and 1703. In 1847 the two statues of St Peter and St Paul were placed on either side of the flight of steps leading up to the main entrance. No other notable changes were made until December 8, 1981, when Pope John Paul II blessed the mosaic of Mater Ecclesiae, Our Lady Mother of the Church. (This picture is also known as “Our Lady of the Column”, because it is a copy of a painting inside the Basilica, on one of the columns of the old Constantine basilica.) Ever since that date it has overlooked the Square from an angle of the Apostolic Palace, to the right of the square.





Mosaic of Our Lady Mater Ecclesiae (Mother of the Church), placed on a corner of one of the buildings overlooking St Peter’s Square.

Just before blessing the mosaic, the Holy Father spoke the following words: “Now I will bless the picture of Our Lady “Mother of the Church”, with the desire that all those who come to St Peter’s Square may raise their eyes to her, and address their own greetings and their own prayer to

her in a spirit of filial trust." From then on, following this indication, Don Alvaro always said a Hail Holy Queen to our Lady, as well as saying the Creed, whenever he came to St Peter's Square. This was yet another way of putting into practice St Josemaria's advice: "Mother! Call her again and again. She is listening, she sees you in danger perhaps, and with her Son's grace she, your holy Mother Mary, offers you the refuge of her arms, the tenderness of her embrace. Call her, and you will find yourself with added strength for the new struggle." (6)

Notes

1. St Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 139.

2. Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo, quoted in Cesare Cavalleri, *Immersed in God*, London-New York: Scepter, 1996, pp. 3-4.

3. Ibid.

4. Msgr. Javier Echevarría, Prelate of Opus Dei, Decreto 6-X-2002, published in Romana, Rome, July-December 2002, Year XVIII, no. 35, p. 289.

5. St Josemaria, Homily "Loyalty to the Church", June 4, 1972, published in *In Love with the Church*, London-New York: Scepter, 1989.

6. St Josemaria, *The Way*, 516.

3. The Pantheon and Santa María Sopra Minerva

On entering the Piazza della Rotonda, the Pantheon looms unexpectedly before one's eyes, looking as though its gray stone bulk has emerged unscathed from the depths of time. It is possibly the best preserved of all the buildings of ancient Rome, and its gigantic dome is an unequalled triumph of architecture.



The most impressive part of all is to cross the portico of ancient pillars, pass through the open bronze doors and enter the interior of the temple. There an unsuspected marvel is to be seen: the light that flows from the circular opening in the ceiling, slips round the curved walls and fills the whole space with serene golden luminosity, majestic and restful.



The Pantheon, as its name suggests, was the temple that the Romans dedicated to all their gods. The building we have today was built in the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, between 118 and 128 AD. Centuries later, when the Roman Empire had been almost completely evangelized, the Emperor Phocas gave it to the Church, and in the year 609 Pope Boniface IV transformed it into the church of Sancta Maria ad Martyres. From that time on the church was also a great reliquary, because the Pope wished it to be the final resting-place of the mortal remains of thousands of Christians, many of them martyrs, which had been buried until then in the Catacombs.

At that late stage, almost at the dawn of the Middle Ages, the dedication of the former Pantheon to the Christian martyrs showed how deeply indebted the Church felt to those who had borne witness to Christ to the extreme of giving their lives for their faith. Children like Tarcisius, virgins like Agnes and Cecilia, mothers like Perpetua, old men like Polycarp, had proved, amidst their weakness, to be stronger than all the Roman legions. They had triumphed, like their Master, in the madness of the Cross, and so merited to be hymned and venerated down the centuries.

In the history of the Church, there are very many Saints who spent at least part of their lives in Rome and showed outstanding devotion to the martyrs. One of these is St Catherine of Siena, who lived in Rome at the end of her life, from November 28, 1378 to April 29, 1380, and loved to go and pray before the shrines commemorating the Apostles and the first Christians who had given their lives for the Faith.

St Catherine went to Rome at the request of Pope Urban VI, who needed her prayers and advice to resolve the crisis of the Western Schism. St Catherine lived in a house very near the Pantheon, together with more than twenty “Caterinati”, as her disciples were known, who had followed her from Siena.

St Josemaria, founder of Opus Dei, was another saint with deep devotion for the martyrs who, throughout the world, have been the seeds from which new Christians have grown in the Church. This is evidenced by his words in a homily given in 1972: “I venerate with all my strength the Rome of Peter and Paul, bathed in the blood of martyrs, the center from which so many have set out to propagate throughout the world the saving word of Christ.” (1)

Santa Maria Sopra Minerva

Behind the Pantheon, and very close to the street where St Catherine lived, is the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, where St Catherine’s mortal remains rest, in a sarcophagus under the main altar. This church is the only Gothic church in Rome, and it holds a large number of works by notable artists, but ever since the end of the fourteenth century, it has been visited above all by faithful who wish to appeal to the intercession of St Catherine of Siena.

In Rome, Catherine devoted herself fully to the service of the Church and

the Pope. At the invitation of Urban VI, she spoke at a consistory of Cardinals, urging them to trust in the Lord and stay firm in defense of the truth. She wrote to the kings of the different countries in Europe to persuade them to recognize the one true Vicar of Christ. She also wrote persuasive, fiery letters to several leading figures of Christendom, appealing to them to come to Rome per fare muro, to create a bulwark around the Pope. And she pacified the inhabitants of Rome when riots broke out in the city because of the intrigues of schismatics.

Above all, St Catherine committed herself to prayer. In a letter written a few months before her death, when she was already seriously sick, she described her day. “At around nine o’clock, when I come out from Mass, you will see a dead woman walk along the way to St Peter’s, and go in there once more to work [i.e. to pray] in the nave of the holy church. There I stay until it is nearly time for Vespers. I would wish to remain there day and night, until I see this people submit and render obedience to their Father, the Pope.” (2)




St Catherine made her own the sufferings of the Church in those difficult times. In Rome, God accepted the offering of her life for the Church, which the Saint had made repeatedly. And so, exhausted by the suffering that oppressed her heart because of the schism that rent the Mystical Body of Christ, and additionally afflicted by serious sickness, she surrendered her soul to God surrounded by her disciples, whom she did not cease to admonish to live in fraternal charity, urging them to be ready

to give their lives too for the Church.

St Josemaria had great devotion to St Catherine of Siena ever since he was young. For instance, in her honor he gave the name catalinas, “catherines”, to the notebooks in which he wrote personal notes about matters of his soul.



The mortal remains of St Catherine of Siena rest beneath the main altar of the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva.

Years later, when the Church was going through difficulties, St Josemaria again had recourse to St Catherine, since she had been a passionate defender of the truth in somewhat similar circumstances. He wrote, “I’ve stoked up the devotion, which in me goes back a long time, to Saint Catherine of Siena – because she knew how to love the Pope with filial love, because she know how to serve God’s holy Church sacrificially, and because she knew how to speak out heroically.” (3)

All Christians need to be able to speak out, to explain the marvels of God in lively and convincing ways – the reality of the Church, the incomparable beauty of Christian life, which provides the answers to the deepest aspirations of the human heart. And so, like the Christian faithful of the early centuries, we will transform this world of ours. We will make it possible for more and more people to embrace the truth and proclaim it in their turn, to bring others to share in the freedom of the children of God, which leads to the good of human society and international relations.

“Ignorance,” the founder of Opus Dei often said, “is the greatest enemy of our faith, and at the same time the greatest obstacle to carrying out the redemption of souls.” (4) He also said, “We must spread the truth, because veritas liberabit vos (Jn 8:32), the truth makes us free, while ignorance enslaves. We have to uphold the right of all men to live, to own what is necessary to lead a dignified existence, to work and to rest, to choose a particular state in life, to form a home, to bring children into the world within marriage and to be allowed to educate them, to pass peacefully through times of sickness and old age, to have access to culture, to join with other citizens to achieve legitimate ends, and, above all, the right to know and love God in perfect liberty, for conscience, true conscience, will discover the imprint of the Creator in all things.” (5)

Notes

1. St Josemaria Escrivá, “Loyalty to the Church” (11), *In Love with the Church*, Scepter, 1989.

2. St Catherine of Siena, Letter 373.

3. Letter to Florencio Sanchez Bella, quoted in A. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Volume III: *The Divine Ways on Earth*, p. 372.

4. St Josemaria, Letter dated January 9, 1951, no. 8, quoted in Vazquez de Prada, vol. III, p. 202.

5. St Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 171.

4. The Catacombs of St Callixtus

The persecution ordered by the Emperor Nero in 64 AD resulted in the martyrdom of a large number of Christians. It was a hard trial for the young Church at Rome, which from that point on also had to undergo a terrible campaign of slander and insult among the population at large. Christians were labeled atheists because they refused to worship the Emperor, and they were considered a danger to the unity of the Roman Empire and enemies of the human race. They were credited with the

most appalling atrocities: infanticide, cannibalism, and immorality of every kind. Tertullian (160-220) described the situation as follows: *"They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not rise or send its waters over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straight away the cry is, 'Away with the Christians, to the lion!*" (1)

Until the Edict of Milan brought peace in 313 AD, the Church lived with constant persecution. It is true that this persecution was not always maintained at the same level of intensity, and that aside from certain specific periods, Christians led normal lives; but the risk of martyrdom was ever-present: a single denunciation by an enemy could initiate a trial. Every convert was aware that Christianity was a radical option that implied the pursuit of holiness and the profession of faith to the point of laying down their lives if necessary. Among the faithful, martyrdom was considered a privilege and a grace from God – an opportunity of being fully identified with Christ at the moment of death. Together with this, the awareness of their own weakness led them to beg God for help to be capable of embracing martyrdom if the occasion arose, and to venerate as their models those who had achieved the martyr's palm. It is easy to imagine how it must have stirred the Christian community at Rome to hear details of the holy deaths of their brethren in the faith. Such accounts both consoled and strengthened the believers, and sowed the seed of new conversions. The relics of the martyrs were gathered up and buried devoutly, and from then on the faithful appealed to them as intercessors.

From the mid-fifth century BC, Roman law had ensured that cemeteries or necropolises ("cities of the dead" in Greek) were located outside the city walls. *"No dead man may be cremated nor buried in the city."* (2) Romans normally cremated the bodies of the dead, but there were also some families who had the custom of burying their family members on their own property, and this custom later became general under the influence of Christianity.

To begin with there was no separation, but Christian faithful and pagans were buried together. From the second century AD onwards, thanks to donations from some high-ranking Christians, the Church began to have

her own necropolises, which the faithful began to call “cemeteries” (Greek koimeteria, from koimáo, to sleep), where the bodies of the faithful rested, awaiting the resurrection of the dead. This was how the Christian catacombs came into being. They were not, as is sometimes thought, hiding-places, or meeting-places for liturgical celebrations, but burial-places where the mortal remains of the brethren were kept. Originally the word “catacomb” denoted the area by the Appian Way between the tomb of Caecilia Metella and the city of Rome. In time it came to be used for any Christian underground cemetery. In the early centuries many of the martyrs were buried in the catacombs, and, together with the tombs of St Peter and St Paul, the catacombs became places of memory and veneration, very dear to the hearts of the Christians at Rome. When times were especially difficult, how often they must have gone there to implore God’s help through the intercession of those who had proclaimed the Gospel with their blood! It was very natural for the faithful to wish to be buried there, to await the resurrection in the company of other members of the Christian community and, if possible, close to the tomb of one of the Apostles or martyrs.

On the Appian Way

The Catacombs of St Callixtus are located just outside Rome on the Appian Way. This area began to be used for burials in the second century AD, and some of the local proprietors, who must have been Christians, allowed the bodies of their brethren in the faith to be buried there too.



Around this time, there took place the burial of the body of the young martyr Cecilia, who had been greatly venerated from the moment of her death. Belonging to a patrician family, Cecilia was converted to Christianity in her youth. Her father married her to Valerianus, whom she brought to the Faith, and the couple decided to live together virginally. Soon Valerian, who dedicated himself to gathering the remains of the martyrs and giving them burial, was discovered and beheaded. Cecilia was then denounced to the authorities. They tried to stifle her to death in the bath-chamber of her own house, and when she was unharmed by this means, she was condemned to be beheaded. Roman law permitted the executioner to give up to three strokes with the sword. Cecilia was struck three times, but did not die immediately. As she lay on the ground, before breathing her last, she found the strength to extend three fingers of her right hand and one of her left, testifying her faith in God One and Three to the very last. When, centuries later, in 1599, the relics were inspected, St Cecilia's incorrupt body was found still in the same position. Maderno (1576-1636) immortalized this in a sculpture which is now in the Church of St Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome, which stands on the site of the saint's own house, and where her body has lain since the ninth century. A copy of this sculpture is to be found in the Catacombs of St Callixtus, at the spot where she was originally buried.




Crypt of St Cecilia.

In the third century this cemetery was donated to Pope Zephyrinus (199-217), who appointed the deacon Callixtus as its administrator. This was the first cemetery to be owned by the Church at Rome, and by the following century it housed the remains of sixteen popes, almost all of

whom had been martyred. Callixtus worked as administrator of the catacombs for the best part of twenty years, before himself being elected pope to succeed Zephyrinus. During that time he enlarged and improved the main areas of the cemetery, particularly the Crypt of the Popes and the Crypt of St Cecilia.

Another martyr whose testimony deeply moved the Christian community was St Tarcisius, or Tarsicius. In the fourth century, Pope St Damasus engraved on St Tarcisius's tomb the exact date of his martyrdom: August 15, 257, during the persecution under the Emperor Valerian. The boy Tarcisius, an acolyte, used to take Holy Communion to imprisoned Christians. On August 15, 257 he was discovered and arrested, and his captors tried to force him to give up the Sacred Hosts he was carrying. He refused, choosing to be stoned to death rather than permit the Body of Christ to be profaned.

With the Peace of Constantine (313), the catacombs continued to be burial sites, and also became places of pilgrimage. After the sack of Rome by Alaric in the fifth century, it became increasingly dangerous to venture outside the city walls, and visits to the catacombs became less and less frequent. In the ninth century it was decided to transfer the bones of the saints to churches inside the city, and during the Middle Ages, the catacombs fell into oblivion. They were never visited, and in many cases the knowledge of their whereabouts was lost.

Although interest in the catacombs revived from the fifteenth century onwards, it was not until the nineteenth century that the catacombs were again valued as holy places and treasures of Christianity. Giovanni Battista De Rossi, the founder of modern Christian archeology, who rediscovered the Catacombs of St Callixtus, relates in his memoirs how he persuaded Pope Pius the Ninth to visit the excavations. When they arrived at the Crypt of the Popes, De Rossi explained the inscriptions to him, and showed him the stone tablet that Pope St Damasus had had set there, with the names of the martyred successors of St Peter who had been buried there. It was at this point that Pope Pius fully realized where he was standing. His eyes shining with tears, he knelt down and spent some time absorbed in prayer. It was the first time for almost a thousand years that a Pope had set foot in the place that was sanctified by the blood of the martyrs.

July 4, 1946

Soon after his arrival in Rome, St Josemaria spoke of his desire to go and pray in the catacombs. Years before, speaking to some of his spiritual sons in the Honduran Legation, Madrid, he had said to them, **"Don’t you see that we’re not alone? We can cry out like the first faithful in the silence of the Roman Catacombs: Dominus illuminatio mea et salus mea, quem timebo? The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear? (Ps 26:1) Only thus can we explain the first Christians’ truly heroic actions. Trusting firmly in God’s help, without doing anything odd, they entered everywhere: into the forum, the palaces, even the Emperor’s own house.”** (3)

Early in the morning on July 4, 1946, St Josemaria went to visit the Catacombs of St Callixtus. The Founder of Opus Dei celebrated Mass in the Crypt of the Popes, and Don Alvaro del Portillo celebrated Mass in the Crypt of St Cecilia. Afterwards they visited the Catacombs of St Sebastian and the tombs of the Apostles.

From the very beginnings of Opus Dei, St Josemaria liked to cite the first Christians as exemplary models to explain the life of the faithful in the Work. He liked to call them **our predecessors in the old and very new apostolate of the Work**. (4)

It has been calculated that the number of Christian graves in the Catacombs of St Callixtus is around five hundred thousand. Most of them are quite plain tombs, marked only by a simple carved image. From the fourth century onwards, once the persecutions had ended, inscriptions become much more common. These would include not only the name but also, as though to indicate the key to the person’s life, their job. There were bakers, carpenters, tailors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, civil servants, soldiers, and many others, clearly reflecting the variety of jobs done by Christians, who, as St Augustine said, mixed with other men and lived the same lives as everybody else, but inspired by *“a different faith, a different hope, and a different love.”* (5) St Josemaria loved to think about those predecessors in the faith who aimed for holiness in the middle of the world, and so acted as leaven in the mass of society. The love and veneration he felt for them often led him to cite them as an example in his preaching, saying for example, **I have no other method for being effective than the first Christians had. There is no other, my**

children. (6)

Throughout his life, the Founder of Opus Dei would frequently refer to paintings or carvings from the catacombs to illustrate subjects such as love for our Lady, fraternity, or union with the Holy Father, all of which were attested to by the faithful of the earliest centuries. However, if there was one image out of all of them that he loved especially, it would definitely be that of the Good Shepherd.



Image of the Good Shepherd.

In the room where St Josemaria worked in Villa Tevere, Rome, there was a marble bas-relief with a reproduction of the Good Shepherd from the catacombs, and underneath it are inscribed some lines by the Spanish poet Juan del Enzina (?1469-?1530).

Such a good flock, / and still more in such a valley, / is a pleasure to guard. / And I have sworn / never to leave it, / but to guard it always.

St Josemaria told his spiritual children, **"From the very beginning, from the second of October 1928, I have felt impelled by God to love you, and to love everything in your lives, with the love of a father and a mother. Nothing that concerns you is alien to me, and the same is true of those thousands of daughters and sons I have never met.**" (7)

He liked talking to them about the Good Shepherd to foster their apostolic concern for all souls. He said, **"Lord, the need to help them is like a dagger in my heart. O Good Shepherd, go in search of them yourself, put them on your shoulders, bringing to life that beautiful scene illustrated in the catacombs. When the shepherd finds the lost sheep, "he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost'." (Lk 15:5-6)** (8)

In his lifetime the founder of Opus Dei not only talked about the Good Shepherd – he also tried hard to be one, living out Christ's words, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* (9) As the Prelate of Opus Dei testifies, St Josemaria *"meditated on the Gospel scenes of the Good Shepherd throughout the whole of his life. He loved this image very much indeed, and wanted to get to know the sheep one by one, to give his life for them, to lead them to the best pastures, and never to fail to look after any that had got lost, or left behind."* (10)

At the entrance to the Catacombs of St Callixtus, before going down the steps leading to the Crypt of the Popes, one can see a painting of the Good Shepherd. This is a copy of the fourth-century original, which is now in the Vatican Museum. There is another copy in Villa Tevere, near Opus Dei's prelatic church, Our Lady of Peace, where St Josemaria's mortal remains rest. The painting evokes so many things: Jesus Christ himself, the first Christians, the Pope, and all souls. St Josemaria once said, **"How tenderly Christ our Lord spoke about the Good Shepherd! How carefully he described him! He told us that the sheep followed the shepherd, and they loved him, and knew that they were being well looked after…** ." (11).

Notes

1. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 40, 12.
2. *Twelve Tablets*, 10.1.
3. St Josemaria, AGP, P12, p. 32.
4. St Josemaria, *Instrucción*, no. 298.
5. St Augustine, *The City of God*, 54, 2.

6. St Josemaria, *notes taken from his preaching*, 29 November 1964.
7. St Josemaria, AGP, P18, p. 151-152.
8. St Josemaria, AGP, P18, p. 276.
9. Jn 10:1.1
10. Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaria*, Madrid, 2000, p. 329.
11. St Josemaria, *notes taken from a get-together*, 13 March 1955.

5. The Holy Cross in Jerusalem

St Josemaria went to pray in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme on August 4, 1946. He had been in Rome less than two months, since June 23.



The reliquary with the Lignum Crucis or fragment of the True Cross.

Among the Jews it was not permitted to bury executed criminals in the common cemetery, and this was one reason why the Body of Jesus was taken to a private tomb, given by Joseph of Arimathea (cf. Matt 27:60).

Instruments of torture and tools used by executioners were also considered unclean, and so these were also buried or thrown into some crack in the ground, to be out of people's way.

No less shameful than those instruments, in the eyes of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, was the hill of Golgotha itself, where Jesus was crucified, and this can be seen from the Latin rendering of the name, *Locus Calvariae*, the place of the skull. After our Lord's Resurrection, it must have produced general surprise in the city to see the Christians going so often to that desolate spot, to kneel on the earth that had been bathed in the Blood of Christ and pray at the hole where the Cross had stood. They also went to kiss the rock tomb where his dead Body had rested.

Very possibly this custom had to be interrupted at certain periods because of the persecutions and other events such as the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. However, it must have persisted into the second century, because the Emperor Hadrian (117-138) had the dip in the ground that separated Golgotha from the Sepulcher filled in, and on this new platform had two temples built, one dedicated to Juno over the Sepulcher, and the other to Venus, on the summit of Golgotha. Hadrian is known to have felt great animosity towards Christianity at the end of his life, and it is almost certain that these temples were built especially to destroy for ever the earthly traces of the Redemption.

Early Church historians commented ironically on the paradoxical results of the pagans' efforts with the passage of time. *"Poor men!" exclaimed Eusebius of Caesarea. "They thought it was possible to hide from the human race the splendor of the sun that had risen over the world! They did not yet understand that it is impossible to keep hidden under earth Him who has won the victory over death!"* (1) Indeed, by the fourth century, when the Church finally enjoyed freedom, these two pagan temples enabled the Holy Places to be located unfailingly. All that had to be done was demolish the temples and excavate underneath, and the Holy Sepulcher and the summit of Calvary were revealed.

The "Invention" (finding) of the Holy Cross

The driving force behind the rediscovery of the places of our Lord's Passion was the Empress St Helena, who traveled to the Holy Land in 326. She was the mother of the Emperor Constantine and was already advanced in years – she must have been around 80 by that time. But she

did not want to die without having prayed in the land where the Lord had lived, died and risen.



Statue of the Empress St Helena on the outside of the Basilica.

We have little information about St Helena's early life. She was probably a native of Bithynia, and of humble origin. St Ambrose says that she was a stabularia – possibly meaning a servant at an inn – before her marriage to Constantius Chlorus in the year 273. Their son Constantine was born the following year. Constantius was an ambitious officer in the Roman army, who achieved the rank of joint Emperor in 293.

That same year he repudiated his wife, who was not of noble blood, and Helena remained under a cloud until her son Constantine bestowed the title of Empress on her in 306. By that time Helena was already a Christian, and she used her privileged position to do good, practicing charity towards the poor, and enriching divine worship by all the means in her power. So outstanding were her faith and piety that St Ambrose did not hesitate to sing her praises, calling her a *"Great woman, who gave to the Emperor much more than you received from him."* (2)

On her journey to the Holy Land she was responsible for the building of the first basilicas, that of the Nativity in Bethlehem and of the Ascension on Mount Olivet. As for Golgotha, when St Helena arrived in Jerusalem the pagan temples had just been demolished, so that the Empress was

able to fulfill her dream of kneeling on the ground where our Savior had been raised on the Cross, and praying at the rock of the Holy Sepulcher. However, she realized at once that the most important relics of all had not yet been found.

St Ambrose gives us a vivid description of her walking among the ruins of the Roman temples accompanied by soldiers and workmen, and asking herself, *"Here is the battleground, but where is the victor's trophy? Do I sit on a throne, while the Cross of the Lord is buried in the dust? Am I surrounded by gold, and the triumph of Christ by rubble? (…) I see that you have done everything possible, O devil, to bury the sword by which you were brought to naught."* (3)

The new excavations ordered by the Empress bore fruit when three crosses were found in the ground near Golgotha, as well as the tablet on which was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (usually represented by the initials of the Latin words, INRI). This was the "invention" or finding (from the Latin invenire, to find) of the Holy Cross of our Lord, which had been hidden for three centuries. The holy Empress left most of the relics in Jerusalem, but she took back with her to Rome three fragments of the True Cross, the tablet with the inscriptions, one of the nails, and some thorns from the crown that the executioners had placed on Jesus' head. She also had a large amount of earth from Golgotha brought to Rome, and the stone steps from the stairway that our Lord had trodden four times on the day of his Passion, when he was tried before Pilate in the Praetorium.



"Titulus Crucis" and the reliquary with the thorns from the Crown.

The Sessorian Basilica, or “Sancta Hierusalem”

There are many documents dating from the third and fourth centuries that describe how, after St Helena’s visit, the Christians venerated the relics that had been left in Jerusalem. This is attested by Eusebius, Rufinus, Theodoret, and St Cyril of Jerusalem. Egeria (or Aetheria), a woman who went on pilgrimage to the Holy Places in the fourth century, spoke of great crowds of the faithful who, even then, gathered from all the Christian East to take part in the solemn celebrations in honor of the Cross.

In the mid-fifth century another historian, Socrates Scholasticus, recorded a pious tradition by which during the Empress’s sea-crossing on her journey back to Rome, there was a violent storm. The ship was at the point of sinking, when St Helena tied the Holy Nail she carried with her to a rope and threw it overboard. As soon as it touched the waves, the sea instantly grew calm.

This Nail, the three fragments of the Cross and the INRI tablet were kept devoutly by St Helena in her imperial palace, the Palatium Sessorianum. Some years later, possibly after his mother’s death, Constantine had a basilica built there which took its name from the palace and was known

as the Sessorian Basilica, and also Sancta Hierusalem – Holy Jerusalem. The earth from Golgotha that the Empress Helena had brought from Golgotha was laid down as the symbolic foundation of the building, and the precious fragments of the Holy Cross were displayed for the veneration of the faithful in a reliquary of gold adorned with jewels.



The relics of the Passion that are preserved in the Basilica.

Of this first basilica built by Constantine only a few pieces of the outer walls now remain. Another was built in the twelfth century, and this was replaced in its turn by a late Baroque building, completed in 1744, which still stands today. Despite these architectural changes, and other events such as the Barbarian invasions of Rome, a large number of documents testify that the relics now venerated in the basilica are the very same as those brought by St Helena from the Holy Land.



Outside of the Basilica of The Holy Cross in Jerusalem.

The basilica naturally became the object of devotional visits by the Christian people, and very soon the Good Friday liturgy began to be celebrated there. Until the fourteenth century the Pope in person walked barefoot at the head of the procession from the Lateran Basilica to the Basilica of Santa Croce, to adore the *vexilla Regis*, the banner of the King and flag of our salvation.

August 4, 1946

St Josemaria went to pray in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme on August 4, 1946. He had been in Rome less than two months, since June 23. Since arriving in the Holy City he had worked intensely, amid the fierce summer heat and in spite of the problems caused by his diabetes, to prepare the documents that had to be presented to the Holy See to obtain the Decretum Laudis, or “Decree of Praise”, for Opus Dei. This would mean the approval of the Work as an

institution of pontifical rite, endowed with universal regulations. St Josemaria urgently wished for this approval as it would facilitate Opus Dei's apostolic expansion, and he put every effort into completing the work in the shortest possible time.

On August 4, at a quarter to five in the afternoon, the Cardinal Prefect of the competent dicastery had a meeting with Don Alvaro del Portillo to discuss the dates when the documents could be presented. This was when the Founder of Opus Dei decided to spend that Sunday afternoon praying in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, while Don Alvaro was with the Cardinal.

It is easy to guess what St Josemaria's prayer that afternoon must have been like: a prayer of confident, faith-filled petition, together with the utmost acceptance of God's Will. There, before the relics of the Passion, he must have thought once again how **"finding the Cross of Jesus Christ on our path assures us that we are following in his footsteps."** (4)

The *Decretum Laudis* was finally granted by the Holy See more than six months later, on February 24, 1947. Although this delay made St Josemaria suffer, he accepted it without losing his peace of mind, as an opportunity to embrace the Cross. And he passed on that attitude to his children.

"We must always be peaceful and positive about setbacks if they occur, about what people call failures. Success or failure is in the interior life. Success consists of receiving Jesus Christ's Cross serenely, opening our arms wide to it, because for Jesus and for us, the Cross is a throne, it is the exaltation of love. It is the summit of redeeming effectiveness to bring souls to God, in our own mode as lay-people: with our conversation, our friendship, our work, our words, our doctrine, our prayer and mortification." (5)

Notes

1. Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Vita Constantini*, 3, 16.
2. St Ambrose, *De Obitu Theodosii*, 41.
3. St Ambrose, *De Obitu Theodosii*, 43-44.

4. St Josemaria Escrivá, *Letter 14 February 1944*, 19.
5. St Josemaria Escrivá, *Letter 31 May 1954*, 30.

6. The Roman Forum

In the time of the Emperors, after a long period of peace and prosperity, the population of Rome had reached the impressive figure of one million people. A tiny minority of these lived in tranquil, spacious villas, while the most of the common people had to put up with living in apartment blocks known as insulae or “islands”. These were several stories high, built with low-quality materials, and crowded together, so that a map of the city consisted of a dense tangle of streets and alleyways.

Rome in those days benefited from considerable advances such as drainage, thermal baths, and aqueducts. But to get an idea of the conditions in which people lived, it has to be borne in mind that the apartments were extremely small, very often consisting of one room per family; there was no hot water, no central heating, and no glass in the windows; and the narrowness of the streets, among other things, very often meant that when fires broke out, whole districts were burned down.

The Romans mitigated the discomforts of their homes by spending as little time in them as they could. They would get up very early to make full use of the daylight. When dawn was breaking they would already be out and about, on their way to work. For many of them, this meant going to the forums, which were the nerve-centers of the city’s life.

Imperial splendor

The magnificence of the public buildings offered a striking contrast with the modest dwellings of the crowded residential blocks. They reflected the immense power of the Roman Empire, and were like a summary of the whole of Rome’s history.

At the beginning, in the sixth century B.C., the Roman Forum was simply a market-place, but religious buildings soon began to be built there. One of the first was the Temple of Vesta, where the sacred fire was kept

burning perpetually in honor of the goddess of the hearth. Beside it was the Regia, the royal palace which, according to legend, had been built for Numa, the second king of Rome. When the monarchy fell, the Regia was used to house the archive of the Calendars and the Annals, which recorded the history of the City of Rome.

The coming of the Republic saw an increase in political activity, and the Forum filled up with government and administrative buildings. The Curia, where the Senate held its deliberations, is still in good condition today. Very little, however, remains of the Comitium, the circular space where the assemblies met to elect the magistrates. Likewise, little is to be seen of the platform called the Rostra, or ships' prows, from which orators addressed the people. All the crucial episodes in the history of the Roman Republic originated in this part of the Forum: the speeches of the Gracchi to improve the lot of the common people; the polemics between Marius and Sulla; Cicero's denunciations of Catiline; the debate in the Senate about ordering Julius Caesar to abandon his military command – an order that he disobeyed, crossing the Rubicon instead and taking the City; and the granting of the title Augustus to Octavius in 29A.D., which is reckoned as the beginning of the imperial era.



This new change of government was followed by extension and improvements to the forums, which became more and more spectacular. Together with the ancient Roman Forum, the Imperial Forums were built

by Julius Caesar, Augustus, Trajan, Nerva and Vespasian. These great public spaces were imposing to see: the broad roads were paved with travertine marble, as were the squares, which were usually dominated by enormous statues; on the buildings, the glimmer of bronze alternated with the gray, white and ochre tones of marble. In religious and civic buildings alike, every detail was carefully designed to stand the test of time, and to impress the beholder.

Most imposing of the civic buildings were the majestic basilicas, used for legal trials and commercial transactions. The vast spaces inside these buildings were divided into long naves and aisles by lines of pillars. In the colonnades along the exterior of the basilicas were rows of booths selling every kind of ware. The remains of the Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine give an idea of the enormous dimensions attained by some of these buildings.

The Forum was adorned with many monuments and statues, and especially by pillars such as that of Trajan, and the various triumphal arches in honor of Titus, Septimius Severus, Constantine, and others. These were carved with depictions of each emperor’s victorious military campaigns, to commemorate his moments of glory for future generations, following the triumphs when the victor was borne in procession along the Via Sacra to the applause and acclamation of the populace.



The Temple of the Dioscuri. In the background, the Arch of Titus.

Obviously there was a risk that all the praise and adulation would go to the emperor's head, so that he would desire his subjects to forget that he was a mere mortal. This did in fact happen, in several cases, when an emperor assumed the status of a god, or accorded divine worship to his own ancestors and even some of his relatives. Augustus, for example, dedicated a temple to Divus Iulius; Antoninus Pius built another in honor of his wife Faustina; and Maxentius built a third in memory of his son Romulus.

Divine worship of the emperor was on the increase when Christianity arrived in Rome. For the Romans this was perfectly compatible with their polytheism, as shown by the fact that the deified emperors also built larger and larger temples to Mars, Venus, Apollo, Cybele, and other gods and goddesses. What was not permitted, however, was for one religion to claim to be the only true one, with the logical consequence that the rest were false. The authorities were tolerant of any novelty provided that it fitted in with the pervading relativism. The Christian faith did not.

The salt of the earth

"How glorious must the heavenly Jerusalem be, if earthly Rome shines

thus!" (1) These words of St Fulgentius, recorded by one of his disciples, reflect the great admiration aroused by the sight of Rome in those who traveled from the provinces of the Empire and saw the city for the first time. By his time, in the early sixth century, Rome had been evangelized, the ancient pagan temples had been closed for over a century, and some Christian churches had been built in the Roman Forum itself. In his Hymn to St Lawrence, Prudentius exults at the victory of the faith in the heart of the Empire: the Quirites, or native Roman citizens, now fill the churches; the leaders of the Senate, who formerly held it a great honor to ride in pagan religious processions down the Via Sacra, now kiss the thresholds of the martyrs' shrines; the noble families delight to see their sons and daughters dedicating their lives to the service of the Church; the fire that burned in the Temple of Vesta has been extinguished, and the leader of the Vestal Virgins who guarded it, Claudia, was even converted to Christianity; the Cross, in short, is raised over the ancient pagan symbols. (2)

How was this change possible? As well as the action of God, one of the factors that explain it is that the first Christians never considered themselves as separated from their city or their job by the fact of embracing the faith. Many of them worked in the Forum, often directly in the service of the Empire; even in the times of Sts Peter and Paul, some were patricians and were among the three hundred Senators who met in the Curia; others were lawyers, attorneys or judges; in the Epistle to the Philippians, written during his captivity in Rome, St Paul sends greetings from the "saints" who were of Caesar's household; (3) and in the Epistle to the Romans he cites the names of Aristobulus and Narcisus, who had worked with the Emperor Claudius. (4)

Almost certainly some members of the Emperor's family embraced the faith as early as the end of the first century A.D. Titus Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla, for instance, were a married couple related to the Emperor Domitian. They had seven children, of whom the eldest two had been selected as candidates for the Imperial throne and educated accordingly by the famous teacher of rhetoric, Quintillian. However, in A.D. 95 Flavius Clemens was suddenly put on trial on a charge of atheism, which was only used against Christians. Domitilla, who was banished to the island of Pandataria, is also known as the owner of the

land which included the catacombs that bear her name. Their children never attained the throne, since in A.D. 96 Domitian himself was assassinated, and the Flavian dynasty ended.

Persecution and martyrdom were an ever-present danger for the first Christian faithful. But even in times of tranquility, ordinary life was not free from obstacles. In Roman society, daily life was filled with acts of adoration of the gods and goddesses. People requesting a loan had to take an oath in the name of the gods; those taking up public office had first to offer sacrifice; if someone walked past a temple or the statue of one of the gods, it was common practice to take off his hat, and so on. There was a long list of accepted modes of behavior whose omission was considered a mark of impoliteness and a betrayal of the traditions of their ancestors. This was one of the most damaging accusations made by Celsus against the Christians: “If they refuse to render due service to the gods, and to respect those who are set over this service, let them not come to manhood, or marry wives, or have children, or indeed take any share in the affairs of life; but let them depart hence with all speed, and leave no posterity behind them.” (5)

Public opinion generally, in those times, shared in the same intolerance towards the followers of Christ. At the very least, Christians were thought to be “odd” people. Given that they helped their neighbor, were faithful to their spouses, paid their taxes, and scrupulously avoided any dishonesty in business, the reason for this was their fanatical devotion to their strange religion, and to prove themselves superior to others. Such twisted interpretation was aggravated by slander and insults, such as that suffered by a young man called Alexamenos in the Paedagogium, the training school for the Emperor’s page-boys. This school was situated on the Palatine, close to the Forum, and archaeologists discovered a graffito depicting a man praying before a crucified figure with the head of an ass. Beside it a scratched inscription says: “Alexamenos adores his god”. Nearby, an inscription in different handwriting reads: “Alexamenos the faithful.” This may well have been the retort of young Alexamenos himself to his companions’ taunts.

In many respects, morality in the Roman Empire was in a deplorable state. Celebrations were marked by indecent plays in the theatres, human beings were made to kill one another for the entertainment of

circus crowds, and art portrayed lasciviousness. Divorce was allowed, and the birthrate was very low because of widespread recourse to abortion and infanticide among other reasons. It is true that not all Romans lived in this way, and morality went into really steep decline only towards the end of the imperial period. But it was always the case that widely accepted pagan customs contradicted the human dignity that Christianity had come to restore.

Faced with all this – degraded customs, persecution, slander, insults, and the very real threat of martyrdom – the first Christians could simply have turned their backs on the world and retreated into a ghetto, as Celsus maliciously urged them to. This, however, never occurred to them. They had found the faith, their Christian vocation, their calling to holiness, in the middle of their work: in the Forum, in studios and workshops, in the army, in the merchants' wagons, etc. They felt no less Roman than their fellow-citizens: they loved their splendid City, and considered the Empire to be not just good but providential, since in the political and cultural unity it had brought about, the faith could spread more easily. All that they rejected were the false gods and the brutal customs. These last they aimed to purify, conscious as they were of being "the salt of the earth." (6)

Ordinary people

Among the ruins of the Roman Forum it is easy to recall the phrase St Josemaria often used to sum up Opus Dei: "The easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians." 7 During the first months he spent in Rome he would often repeat phrases like the following, which he wrote years later, to impress upon people's minds Opus Dei's secular character: "The early Christians lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their Baptism. Externally they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens. The members of Opus Dei are ordinary people. They work like everyone else and live in the midst of the world… just like any other Christian citizen who wants to respond fully to the demands of his faith." (8)

The Second Vatican Council proclaimed strongly that all the faithful are called to holiness, and that it is the responsibility of the laity to bring earthly realities to Christ. In the nineteen-forties, many people identified

Christian perfection with the religious life, and it was hard for people to grasp fully how anyone could aspire to Christian perfection in the middle of the world, working at any and every honest job.

St Josemaria never tired of repeating that the faithful of Opus Dei are "ordinary people", like the first Christians. And he often said, too, that Christians today have the same means as they did to conquer in interior battles for holiness. **"Think about what the Holy Spirit says, and let yourself be filled with awe and gratitude: *Elegit nos ante mundi constitutionem* – he chose us before the foundation of the world, *ut essemus sancti in conspectu eius!* – that we might be holy in his presence. To be holy isn't easy, but it isn't difficult either. To be holy is to be a good Christian, to resemble Christ. The more closely a person resembles Christ, the more Christian he is, the more he belongs to Christ, the holier he is. And what means do we have? The same means the early faithful had, when they saw Jesus directly or caught a glimpse of him in the accounts the Apostles and Evangelists gave of him."** (9)

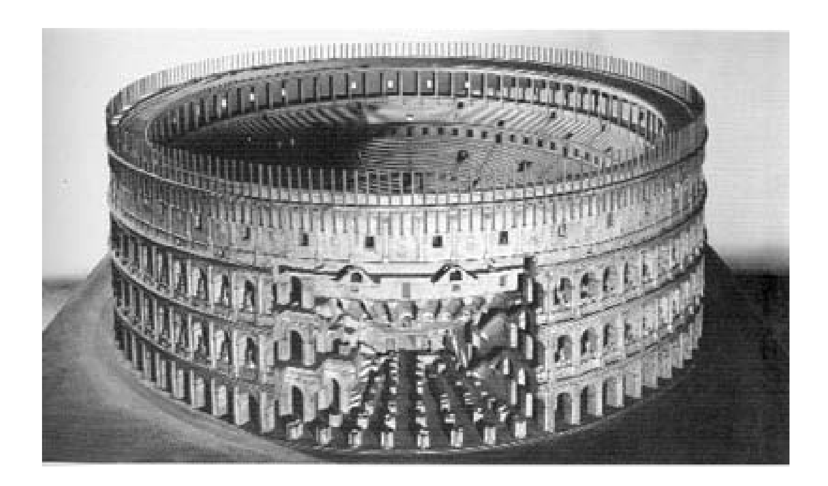
Using these means, the Christians of the first centuries after Christ became saints, in the midst of a society that was pagan, partly corrupt, and that persecuted them to the death. And with those means, they did apostolate wherever they found themselves, until they transformed a civilization that was hostile to the faith, working from within it. **"To follow in Christ's footsteps, today's apostle does not need to reform anything, but even less has he to take no part in the contemporary affairs going on around him. He has only to act as the first Christians did, and give life to his environment."** (10)

Notes

1. *Life of St Fulgentius of Ruspe*, III, 27.
2. Cf. Prudentius, *Peristephanon II*, 513-529.
3. Cf. Phil 4:2.
4. Cf. Rom 16:10-11.
5. Quoted by Origen, *Contra Celso*, VIII, 55.
6. Mt 5:13.
7. St Josemaria, *Conversations*, 24.

8. Ibid.
9. St Josemaria, ibid.
10. St Josemaria, *The Forge*, 10.

7. The Colosseum



Reconstruction of the Colosseum, Museo della Civiltà Romana.

In 1972 St Josemaria said in a homily, “I venerate with all my strength the Rome of Peter and Paul, bathed in the blood of martyrs, the centre from which so many have set out to propagate throughout the world the saving word of Christ. To be Roman does not entail any manifestation of provincialism, but authentic ecumenism. It presupposes the desire to enlarge the heart, to open it to all men with the redemptive zeal of Christ, who seeks all men and takes in all men, for he has loved all men first.” (1)

The ruins of the Colosseum are an eloquent witness to the greatness of ancient Roman civilization, and the same time to its immorality and impermanence. Pope John Paul II characterised it in telling words when he called it “this tragic yet glorious monument of imperial Rome, a silent witness to power and dominion, a testimonial to moments of life and of

death, where cries of blood (cf. Jn 4:10) seem still to ring out, together with words of peace and forgiveness.” (2)

Greatness and cruelty

The Flavian Amphitheatre, to give the Colosseum its original name, is a reflection of the genius of Rome, with its capacity for carrying out stupendous undertakings while attending to practicalities down to the last detail. Everything about this vast construction is designed to ensure that its imposing dimensions detract nothing from its beauty or its utility. Architectural balance is achieved through the three tiers of arches in which the spaces are carefully distributed to give a sense of lightness. Practical common sense is evidenced by thousands of details. More than eighty different entrances enabled the amphitheatre to be filled with people or evacuated in just a few minutes; the distribution of seats was calculated to give a full view of the arena from each of the fifty thousand places available; awnings could be extended by a team of a hundred soldiers, to protect the audience from sun or rain as needed; and there was a complex network of underground passages, with pulley-operated lifts to haul the gladiators or wild beasts up to the arena.

This huge construction took eight years to build, and as many as twelve thousand slaves may have been used as labour. Many of these would have been Jews, taken prisoner by Titus after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. The new Amphitheatre was inaugurated in 80 A.D., with a hundred days of spectacles and festivities, during which hundreds of gladiators and around five thousand animals were killed in the arena. Also around that time the first naumachiae were held: these naval battles, enacted by flooding the whole of the arena with water, must have caused a huge impact on the Roman population by their novelty.

Successive emperors competed to offer more grandiose spectacles every year. Seneca had already lamented the spiral of violence and inhumanity that this type of entertainment gave rise to. (3) The populace demanded ever more sensational events, interested only in blood and killings, the more cruel and sophisticated the better.

In this context the execution of criminals was not seen as particularly exciting fare for the public, since the defenceless prisoners seldom offered much resistance to the executioners or wild beasts. For this reason they generally took place at the end of the morning, as an interval

between the morning and afternoon gladiator contests. Many of the prisoners who were put to death under the gaze of brutalized and often bored spectators, were Christians.

A noble martyrdom “in Amphitheatrum”

A moving example of how the early Christians faced martyrdom is given to us by St Ignatius of Antioch, who died in the times of the Emperor Trajan. A convert from paganism, Ignatius was St Peter’s second successor to the episcopal see of Antioch. In 107 A.D. he was arrested, condemned ad bestias – to be killed by wild beasts – and send to Rome under military guard for execution.



Martyrdom of St Ignatius of Antioch.

Of his long journey from Syria to Rome we know a great deal through the historian Eusebius of Caesarea and, especially, the seven letters written by St Ignatius himself to the churches of seven different cities, to strengthen them in their faith and forewarn them against the Gnostic heresies which were being propagated at that time.

All his letters begin with the greeting “From Ignatius, also called Theophorus (‘God-bearer’)”. Opus Dei’s founder, St Josemaria, used to love this name, and he wrote: “One ought to be able to apply to every Christian the name that was used in the early ages: Bearer of God. Your actions should be such that you really deserve to be called by that

wonderful name.” (4)

St Ignatius was full of God, and this is reflected in the tone of his letters. “Abundant happiness through Jesus Christ, and His undefiled grace” is his greeting to the Ephesians, and he sends the Philadelphians a greeting “in the blood of Jesus Christ, who is our eternal and enduring joy”. The reasons for his happiness were totally supernatural, since the future martyr knew what awaited him, and the soldiers who guarded him were far from gentle. “From Syria even unto Rome,” he wrote, “I fight with wild beasts, by land and sea, by night and by day, being bound amidst ten leopards, I mean a company of soldiers, who only grow worse when they are kindly treated. But I am the more instructed by their injuries [to act as a disciple of Christ].” (5)

St Ignatius rejoiced to share in Christ’s Cross, and ardently desired that his identification with our Lord should be completed in martyrdom. Accordingly he begged the Christians not to intercede for him with the Roman authorities, and expressed his desire that the wild beasts would devour him speedily, “and not deal with me as with some, whom, out of fear, they have not touched.” 6 There were some famous cases in which the voracious animals had refused to attack Christians, or, to the spectators’ astonishment, had even lain down meekly at their feet. Long-standing traditions attest this of St Martina, St Alexander and St Marinus, among others.

The Bishop of Antioch was thrown to the lions in the Colosseum. (7) Thus was fulfilled his expressed desire: “I am God’s wheat, and I must be ground by the teeth of wild beasts to become the immaculate bread of Christ.” (8)

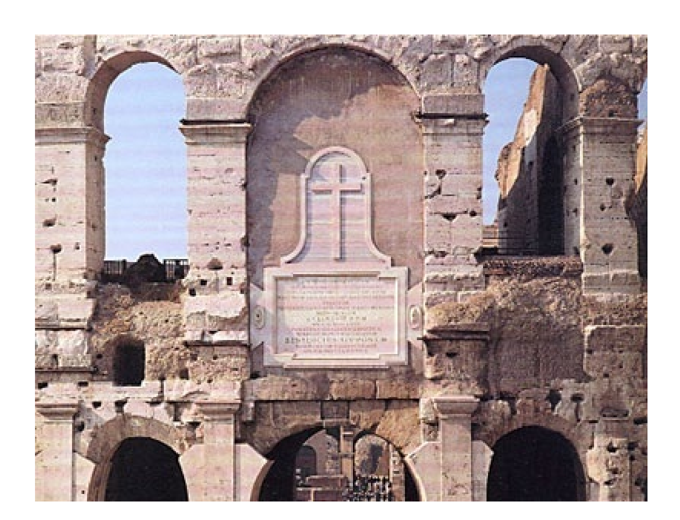
After the horrible spectacle was over the Christians managed to rescue some of the martyr’s bones. These they preserved with great reverence and later sent back to Antioch. As St John Chrysostom said to the faithful of Antioch, “You benefited from his bishopric, and those of Rome admired his martyrdom. The Lord took this priceless treasure from you for a short time to show him to the Romans, and has now returned it to you increased in glory.” (9) In the seventh century, for fear of Saracen invasion, the relics were once more taken to Rome, and today repose in the church of St Clement. Pilgrims may go there, as St John Chrysostom recommended, “to draw spiritual fruit from these holy remains, since they

are like a treasure from which part may be taken away without diminishing the whole.” (10).

The path of ordinary life

Although the Circus Maximus, Nero’s Circus, and other Roman sites were also the scenes of many martyrdoms, in 1794 Pope Benedict XIV consecrated the Colosseum as a holy place, sacred to the memory of the Passion of Christ and the sufferings of the martyrs. That same year he had the fourteen Stations of the Cross placed around the arena.

People entering the Colosseum today are immediately confronted with a large black wooden cross, inviting them to pray. On this spot, before the instrument of our Lord’s Passion, which also recalls those who gave their lives for Christ, desires for greater self-giving arise very naturally, desires of overcoming one’s own selfishness once for all, desires of an increased love of mortification in all Christians. With the help of God’s grace, these holy aspirations can come to fruit in ordinary, daily life. “Many who would willingly let themselves be nailed to a Cross before the astonished gaze of a thousand onlookers cannot bear with a Christian spirit the pinpricks of each day! Think, then, which is the more heroic.” (11)



Stone plaque commemorating the consecration of the Colosseum as a holy place.

The founder of Opus Dei had a great devotion to the martyrs of the early

centuries of the Church. At the same time, he always reminded people that holiness is for everyone, and warned against the mistake of imagining that supernatural heroism is confined to special situations such as persecutions, martyrdom, overwhelming difficulties, or undertaking great enterprises for the glory of God. Instead of waiting for deeds of such magnitude, which might occasionally arise in real life, but only very seldom, he encouraged all Christians to follow the path of heroism in our own normal situations. Hence the advice he gave in *The Way*: “You want to be a martyr. I will place a martyrdom within your reach: to be an apostle and not to call yourself an apostle, to be a missionary — with a mission — and not to call yourself a missionary, to be a man of God and to seem a man of the world: to pass unnoticed!” (12).

Like the martyrs, we Christians have to have a burning desire to fulfil God’s Will and show him our love even through sacrifice, undertaken with joy, because “Mortification is not pessimism or bitterness. Mortification is useless without charity. That is why we must seek mortifications which, while helping us develop a proper dominion over the things of this earth, do not mortify those who live with us. A Christian has no warrant to act as torturer, nor should he allow himself to be treated as a feeble wretch. A Christian is a man who knows how to love with deeds and to prove his love on the touchstone of suffering. But, I must remind you, mortification does not usually consist of great renunciations, for situations requiring great self-denial seldom occur. Mortification is made up of small conquests, such as smiling at those who annoy us, denying the body some superfluous fancy, getting accustomed to listening to others, making full use of the time God allots us... and so many other details. We find it in the apparently trifling problems, difficulties and worries which arise without our looking for them in the course of each day.” (13)

<u>Notes</u>

1. St Josemaria Escrivá, *In Love with the Church*, Chapter 1 “Loyalty to the Church”, 11 (June 4, 1972.)
2. John Paul II, *Way of the Cross at the Colosseum*, Good Friday 2003, Opening Prayer.
3. Cf. Seneca, *Epistulae Morales I*, 7, 3-5.

4. St Josemaria Escrivá, *The Forge*, 94.
5. St Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*, 5, 1.
6. Ibid., 5, 2.
7. *Martyrium Antiochenum*, 6, 3.
8. St Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*, 4, 1.
9. St John Chrysostom, *In Sanctum Ignatium Martyrem homiliae*, no. 5, PG 50, col. 594.
10. Ibid., col. 595.
11. St Josemaria Escrivá, *The Way*, 204.
12. St Josemaria Escrivá, *The Way*, 848.
13. St Josemaria Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, 37.

8. The Via Appia

In the year 312 B.C. the Senator Appius Claudius was appointed Censor of the Republic of Rome. During his term of office he undertook many major reforms and public works, but history remembers him principally for the construction of the road that bears his name, the Via Appia or Appian Way.

The aim of the new road was to improve communication between Rome and Capua, so that the Roman legions could march more swiftly along the 195 kilometers that separate the two cities. As the years went by the road was extended several times, and by the second century B.C. it reached as far as Brindisi, the main port for the eastern provinces, more than five hundred kilometers from Rome. Four centuries later the Emperor Trajan improved it for the use of carriage traffic, and the Via Appia became one of the main economic arteries of the Empire. It was popularly known as Regina viarum, the Queen of roads, both because of its great length and its remarkable beauty: on each side of the roadway houses, temples and mausoleums were built, adding a touch of splendor to the enchanting simplicity of the Roman countryside. It made a good prelude for the traveler who was about to encounter the majesty of the Eternal City.

The Appian Way has been the scene of several events prized by Christians. The Acts of the Apostles tells how St Paul entered Rome by this road. “And so we came to Rome. And the brethren there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them Paul thanked God and took courage.” (1)

St Paul was to appear before the Emperor’s tribunal. A group of Christians came out to meet him at Tres Tabernae or Three Taverns, a resting-place for travelers about fifty kilometers from the city; and some of them came another twelve kilometers further still, to Forum Appii or the Forum of Appius, the end of the navigable canal from Terracina. It is easy to imagine how moved St Paul was, and it is also a graphic illustration of how the first Christians loved each other and the veneration in which the Apostles were held.

The Via Appia is also where the Catacombs of St Sebastian and of St Callixtus are situated, where from the second century onwards thousands of Christians, including many martyrs, were buried. Some, like Pope Sixtus II and a group of priests and deacons who were with him as he celebrated Mass, gave their lives for love of God on that very spot.

Later, during the Middle Ages, the Appian Way became one of the roads most traveled by pilgrims on pilgrimage to the Eternal City to pray at the tomb of St Peter.

Finally, a pious tradition links St Peter, the Prince of the Apostles himself, to this road. Less than a kilometer from the Gate of St Sebastian, the legend is commemorated by the Church of Quo Vadis. According to tradition, when the persecution of 64 A.D. broke out the Christians of Rome persuaded St Peter to flee to another place for safety. Peter prepared for the journey and left the city early in the morning one day in the summer. Shortly after crossing the Porta Appia he saw Jesus coming towards him. Peter asked him, “Where are you going, Lord?”
“I am going to Rome to be crucified.”
“Lord,” said St Peter, “will you be crucified again?”
“Yes, Peter, again.”
At this, Jesus disappeared and Peter understood everything. In the rays of the rising sun he turned round and returned to Rome, where shortly afterwards he embraced martyrdom.



Stone slab showing the place where, according to tradition, our Lord set his feet when he appeared to St Peter.

July 3, 1946

On July 3, 1946, at half past eight in the evening, St Josemaria took a walk on the Appian Way for a few moments of rest.

He had arrived in Rome on June 23, and the following day celebrated Mass in the apartment in Piazza Città Leonina. That same morning he went to the Vatican to discuss the canonical solution for Opus Dei. As well as this, he requested permission to reserve the Blessed Sacrament. The next day he received the news that the Holy See granted him permission to set up a Tabernacle.

José Orlandis, who had come to Rome with him and stayed there for some days, recalled years later, “The Father suffered a lot those first days because he was exhausted by the journey and the terrible heat that was increasing in Rome at that time, all of which was made worse by his poor state of health. ‘Here’s the bundle of rags!’ he said. ‘You’ve got your way!’.

But the news that the Holy See had granted permission for us to have an oratory in the house with the Blessed Sacrament reserved, was a welcome message that galvanized his energies and launched him into preparing a worthy welcome for our Lord, with all his strength. As was his custom – a custom he taught his children, so that it will always be kept up in Opus Dei centers – the best room in that little apartment was made

into the oratory.

And the Father began to search through antique shops and bric-a-brac shops, which are so plentiful in Rome, in search of the things that were needed to set up the oratory properly. We soon found, among other things, a marble Crucifix, two big candlesticks, and four antique paintings, all fairly cheap. At home he worked so hard on preparing the oratory that we younger men followed panting in his wake, and felt totally exhausted by the evening. ‘Father,’ we said to him jokingly, ‘you said you’d come like a bundle of rags! You’ll end up being one at this rate!’ On Wednesday July 3, when St Josemaria celebrated Mass, he reserved the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle. That was the first Tabernacle in an Opus Dei center in Rome.” (2)

St Josemaria’s joy may well be imagined. Years before, he had written: “As you make your way through the familiar streets of the city, have you never had the joy of discovering... another Tabernacle?” (3) Now that dream had come true in Rome!

After those days of intense work, they took a well-deserved break that evening. At eight-thirty, as the sun was setting, they went out to the Appian Way. Anyone who has been there can easily picture the scene: the memory of the early Christians, the austerity of the Roman road, the remains of grandiose buildings of earlier centuries, the cypresses and pine-trees that delineate the roadway, the silence and solitude of evening… all bathed in the gentle light of dusk. The landscape around the Appian Way outside Rome is very flat. On each side the country can be seen stretching for miles until it melts into the horizon. The sunset, with its intense golden tones, is an extraordinary spectacle to contemplate. St Josemaria’s loving soul, already deeply moved by what had happened that day, and by the beauty he could see on all sides, may well have taken flight, to dream of Opus Dei projected down through time, and of his children bringing many souls to God in the middle of the world, through **"our apostolate, so similar to that of the first Christians."** (4)

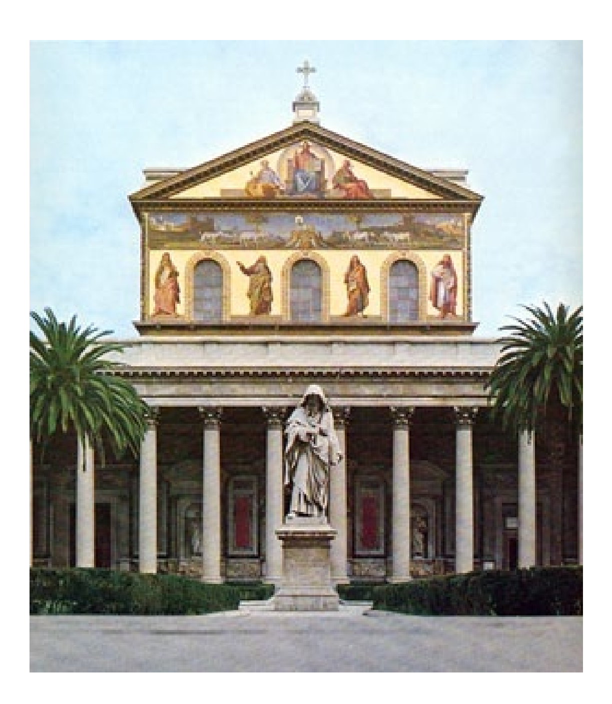
Notes

1. Acts 28:14-15.
2. José Orlandis, *Mis recuerdos: primeros tiempos del Opus Dei en*

Roma, Rialp, Madrid, 1995, p. 146.
3. St Josemaria Escrivá, *The Way*, 270.
4. St Josemaria, circular letter, January 9, 1938; cf. A. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus De*i, Volume II: God and Daring, Scepter, New York, 2003, p.182.

9. The memory of St Paul

Among the first Christians at Rome were disciples of St Paul, as is evident from the long list of greetings at the end of the Letter to the Romans. On the Aventine Hill in Rome lived Aquila and Prisca or Priscilla, a married couple of traders who first met St Paul in Corinth. Others who are greeted by name were people from Israel, Greece or Asia Minor who had gone to live in Rome, the capital of the Empire, after hearing St Paul preach the Gospel in their native countries.



Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, Rome.

The affectionate tone of his greetings reflects the fraternal spirit that existed among these first faithful. Despite their very different origins and social circles, ranging from slaves to members of the nobility, they were all very united. St Josemaria described them as “families who lived in union with Christ and who made him known to others. Small Christian communities which were centres for the spreading of the Gospel and its message. Families no different from other families of those times, but living with a new spirit, which they spread to all those who were in contact with them. This is what the first Christians were, and this is what Christians today have to be: sowers of peace and joy, the peace and joy that Jesus has brought to us.” (1)

St Paul’s lodgings in Rome

In this atmosphere of close unity, St Paul’s arrival in Rome must obviously have been a cause of great joy for the Christians there. As mentioned above, some of them owed their faith to him, and all of them had heard of him and were very keen to meet him. In addition, they must have been extremely grateful for the Letter he had written to them in the year 57 or 58. It was natural, then, for them to be so impatient to see him that they went to meet him on the Via Appia. Some of them met him at the Forum of Appius and others at the Three Taverns, 69 and 53 kilometers outside Rome respectively. The Acts of the Apostles notes that on seeing them, Paul gave thanks to God and took fresh heart. (2.

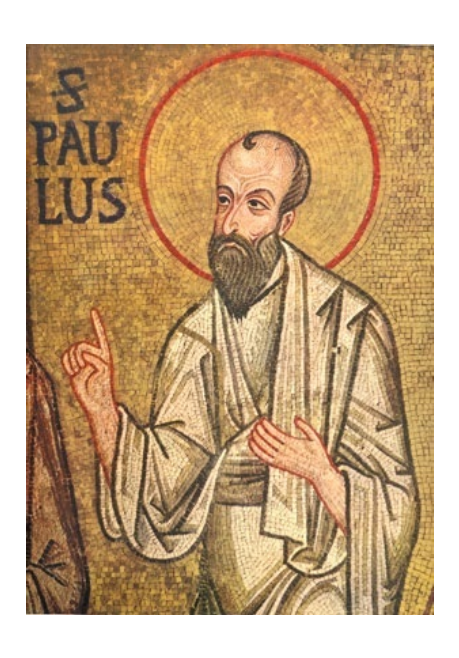
Once he arrived in Rome, about the middle of the year 61, Paul was permitted to live in a private house with one soldier to guard him.3 Roman citizens had the right to this type of imprisonment, known as custodia *militaris*, military custody, halfway between *custodia libera*, supervised freedom, and custodia publica or penal detention. The prisoner could choose his own place of residence and the soldier who guarded him had to stay with him all the time and put him on a chain whenever he went out of the house. According to an ancient tradition, St Paul lived in a hired house near the great bend in the River Tiber at the level of the Tiber Island. It was a densely populated area with a large proportion of Jews. Archaeological evidence shows that many of them were tanners.

On the spot of St Paul’s house, the church of San Paolo alla Regola now stands, the only church dedicated to St Paul within the ancient walls of

Rome. As you enter on the right, an architrave bears the inscription Divi Pauli Apostoli Hospitium et Schola – the Lodging and School of the Apostle St Paul. In the same area there has been located a building dating from the imperial era which, like others nearby, had a large barn attached to it. This matches the description of St Paul's house found in some second-century documents; the large barn explains how it was possible for St Paul, newly arrived in Rome, to summon to his lodging a large number of Jews living in Rome to announce the Kingdom of God to them. (4)

The result of this encounter was that some of the Jews became believers, but St Paul also met considerable resistance to the Gospel. As a result, he resolved that from then on he would dedicate himself to the Gentiles, because they were ready to listen to the message of salvation. (5)

St Paul remained in that house for two years, spreading the fire of his faith and love for Christ in the very heart of imperial Rome. A prisoner, or at any rate deprived of freedom of movement, he was nevertheless convinced that for those who love God, all things work together for the good, 6 and so was able to write to the Philippians, "I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear." (7)



St Josemaria encouraged us to follow St Paul's example and help others to turn to God. "If we pray and meditate on these words of St Paul, we will realise that we have no alternative but to work, in the service of all souls. Anything else would be selfishness. If we look at ourselves humbly, we will see clearly that, in addition to his gift of faith, Our Lord has also granted us a number of talents and qualities. None of us has been mass-produced. Our Father has created us one by one and shared out different goods among his children. It is up to us to use these talents, these qualities, in the service of all men. We are called to use the gifts God has given us as instruments to help others discover Christ." (8)

This missionary activity on the part of the early Church in Rome was blessed by God with abundant fruit. The Christians did personal apostolate and made converts, and during his captivity there, St Paul was already able to send to other churches greetings from Christians living in the Emperor's own house (Phil 4:22). These "saints of Caesar's household" were probably civil servants working in the administration of the Empire. The Christians at Philippi must have been delighted to see that the Gospel had also reached those circles, from which so much could be done to change society.

The place of St Paul's martyrdom

The end of the Acts of the Apostles tells how Paul stayed for two whole years in his hired house, and received all those who came to see him. He

preached the Kingdom of God and taught everything about the Lord Jesus Christ. (9)

Everything seems to indicate that at the end of that period, the maximum allowed in Roman law for custodia militaris, St Paul regained his freedom and was able to leave Rome and travel to other places. In his letter to the Romans years before, he had written of his intention of going to Spain to preach the Gospel there, and perhaps he did this in the year 63. (10)

From what he writes in his last letters, those to Timothy and Titus, it may be deduced that between 63 and 66 or 67 AD, St Paul travelled through different cities in Greece and Asia Minor. Meanwhile, during the summer of 64, there had begun Nero's cruel persecution against the Christians at Rome, which then spread to other parts of the Roman Empire. Paul may have been captured at Troas, since he left that city without taking so much as his travelling-cloak with him. (11) After his arrest he was taken to Rome once more, guarded by a number of soldiers.

This second imprisonment was much harsher than the first. It was custodia publica, meaning that he was kept in prison as a common criminal. Paul was old and tired by this time, and he found it hard to endure the separation from his closest fellow-workers. Only Luke, the faithful doctor, remained with him, and St Paul wrote to Timothy to come to Rome as soon as possible. (12) Some of his disciples had abandoned him in his hour of need, and he was hurt most of all by the desertion of Demas, who left him "for love of this present world". (13) "For a trifle, and for fear of persecution, this man, whom Saint Paul had quoted in other epistles as being among the saints, had betrayed the divine enterprise. I shudder when I realise how little I am: and it leads me to demand from myself faithfulness to the Lord even in events that might seem to be indifferent – for if they do not help me to be more united to Him, I do not want them." (14).

Completely deprived of his freedom, and cut to the quick by these infidelities, St Paul suffered, as only those whose love is measureless can suffer. At the same time, his total trust in God filled him with courage, and he exclaimed, "I am suffering and wearing fetters like a criminal. But the word of God is not fettered. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which in Christ Jesus goes with eternal glory." (15)

The Christians of Rome tried to keep close to St Paul and to minister to him in so far as they could under the persecution. St Paul sent their greetings to Timothy, with Eubulus, Pudens, Linus and Claudia mentioned by name. (16) At the time of writing to this much-loved disciple, Paul had had a first hearing at the tribunal and had had his trial postponed. (17) He knew that he had just a few months left, and so he urged Timothy to come quickly, before the winter. However, Paul entertained no doubts as to the final sentence. “I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” (18)

We do not know whether Timothy arrived in time to give a last embrace to the man to whom he and his family owed their faith. Paul was condemned to death and executed ten days after the sentence, as the law laid down. As a Roman citizen he was beheaded, with no public watching, outside the city walls.

The place of St Paul’s martyrdom was the district that is now known as the EUR, in the south of Rome. The inhabitants of the city referred to it as ad aquas salvias. A Christian cemetery was located there from the third century, and a church from the fourth or fifth. According to ancient traditions, St Paul was beheaded near the main road, on a raised piece of ground by a pine-tree; when his head fell onto the sloping ground it rebounded three times, and a spring of water burst out miraculously each time. For this reason, the church later built on the spot was given the name of St Paul ad tres fontes, at the three fountains.



In the house where St Paul once lived, the Church of St Paul Alla Regola now stands.

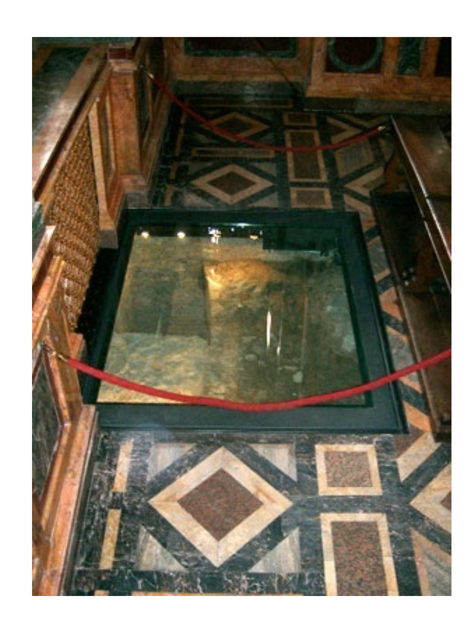
The tomb in the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls

St Paul’s body was buried in a cemetery located on the Via Ostia. The Christians built his tomb as a trophaeum, a modest monument similar to that at the tomb of St Peter. The priest Gaius, at the end of the second century, spoke of the monuments of the Apostles who had founded the Church at Rome that were on the Vatican Hill and the Via Ostia. (19)

After the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the Emperor Constantine had a basilica built to guard and venerate the tomb of the Apostle of the Gentiles. It was not a very large one, but was enlarged at the end of the fourth century with the construction of the Basilica of the Three Emperors, so named because the work was begun by Emperor Valentinianus II, continued by Emperor Theodosius, and completed by Emperor Arcadius. The heart of this second basilica, like the first, was the tomb of St Paul: in both cases, the altar was placed immediately above the tomb.

The present basilica was built in the nineteenth century, after the previous one was destroyed by fire in 1823. During the construction work the area of the tomb itself was uncovered, and two architects made some

sketches of its position and appearance. Apart from these rather rough sketches, little more was known about the tomb, until in December 2006 news was published of the finding of a marble coffin, situated in the Confessio or area beneath the altar of the Basilica. It is thought that it was in this coffin that St Paul's mortal remains were placed. The simplicity of the coffin contrasts with the much more artistic design of other coffins which had been found in the vicinity in the mid-nineteenth century. The difference in quality may be attributed to the fact that the Emperors, knowing that it contained the Apostle's remains, preferred to leave it as it was and not change it for a richer one.



Under the altar of the Confessio of the Basilica a marble coffin has been found.

Shortly after the news of the finding of this coffin had been made public, on December 14, 2006, His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, came to pray in the Basilica. That same day, he had visited the Pope in the Vatican. They exchanged gifts expressive of their desire to achieve unity: a picture of the Virgin Mary as *Panaghia*, all holy, and an icon with the classic image of Sts Peter and Paul embracing. This was the first time that a Primate of Greece had ever paid an official visit on the Pope. This encouraging news undoubtedly stimulates us to

pray still harder for Christian unity. Ecumenism is a task for all Christians to work at. The Founder of Opus Dei, St Josemaria, sought to support and promote it in daily life, so that the beauty and attraction of the faith could be seen in his dealings with friends who were not Catholics. He once spoke, for instance, of a book he was planning to write, and went on: “I will state my own opinions, which I trust will be respected by those who think the opposite, as I respect all opinions which differ from mine, and as I respect those who have a large and generous heart even though they do not share with me the Christian Faith. Let me tell you something that has happened to me often. The last occasion was here in Pamplona. A student came up to me. He wanted to greet me. ‘Monsignor,’ he said, ‘I’m not a Christian. I’m a Muslim.’ ‘You are a son of God, as I am,’ I answered him. And I embraced him with all my heart.” (20)

Notes

1. St Josemaria Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, 30.
2. Acts 28:15.
3. Acts 28:16.
4. Cf. Acts 28:24.
5. Cf. Acts 28:28.
6. Cf. Rom 8:28.
7. Phil 1 12-14. Not all scholars agree that St Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians during his first imprisonment in Rome; some maintain he wrote it from Ephesus. Nor is there unanimous agreement on the sequence of events of the last few years of his life. The outline given here is one of several possible ones.
8. St Josemaria Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 258.
9. Acts 28:30-31.
10. Cf. Rom 15:24. The Muratorian Fragment states that St Paul did indeed go to Spain, as does St Clement’s Epistle to the Corinthians.
11. Cf. 2 Tim 4:13.
12. Cf. 2 Tim 4:9-13.
13. 2 Tim 4:10.
14. St Josemaria Escrivá, *Furrow*, 343.
15. 2 Tim 2:8-10.
16. 2 Tim 4:21.

17. Cf. 2 Tim 4:16-17.
18. 2 Tim 4:6-8.
19. The words of Gaius were cited by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book II, 25, 6-7.
20. St Josemaria Escrivá, *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, 85.

10. Little shrines to Our Lady

When St Josemaria arrived in Rome in 1946 he was delighted to see how many pictures and statues of Our Lady are to be found in the streets there. He often used to ask other people in Opus Dei whether they had seen them, and encouraged them to discover more, and to say a few loving words to Our Lady whenever they saw one of these little shrines.



The icon of Our Lady Salus Populi Romani.

This was a habit he had acquired in his youth, as he wrote in his "personal notes". "This morning I backtracked just like a little boy, to greet our Lady before her statue on Atocha Street, at the top of the house the Congregation of Saint Philip has there. I had forgotten to greet her. What little boy misses a chance to tell his mother he loves her? My Lady, may I never become an ex-child." (A. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I p. 257).

In the historic center of Rome there are around five hundred *edicole* or

little shrines to Our Lady. In the mid-nineteenth century there were almost three thousand, but many of them disappeared after the city-center restructuring carried out from 1870 onwards. The word edicola designates the little construction like a miniature dome or a pane of glass, that shelters the picture or statue from the weather.

It is not certain when these representations of the Blessed Virgin Mary began to be set on the walls of buildings, but many authors suggest that the spread of this custom was connected with one of the best-loved paintings of Our Lady in Rome, venerated in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major under the title *Salus Populi Romani* – Salvation of the People Rome. According to an old tradition, the icon received this name because of a miracle that occurred in the year 590. Rome was suffering from the plague, and the inhabitants of the city carried the icon in procession from Saint Mary Major to Saint Peter's to implore an end to the epidemic. When the procession reached the fortress called Hadrian's Mausoleum, an angel appeared, re-sheathing his sword, as a sign that the sickness had been ended through Our Lady's intercession. From then on, the fortress was known as Castel Sant'Angelo – the castle of the holy Angel – and reproductions of the icon *Salus Populi Romani* were placed on the house-fronts past which the procession had gone, in thanksgiving.



St Josemaria was delighted to see how many pictures of Our Lady are to be found in the streets there.

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the custom of placing pictures or statues of Our Lady on the outer walls of buildings became still more widespread, and accounts of miracles are linked to the memory of some of these representations. Until well into the nineteenth century,

the only street-lighting in Rome was that afforded by the lamps or candles set by the faithful before these little shrines to Our Lady. As one student of sacred art expressed it at the end of the nineteenth century, “The ever-burning lamps placed by the faithful before the images of Mary are at the same time a sign of devotion and a light to guide the wayfarer; who, glimpsing the face of the Blessed Virgin by their light, is saved from getting lost either along the paths of life or along those of the city.”

On the front of n. 36 Via di Villa Sacchetti is a representation of Our Lady of Loreto, which was set there at the request of Saint Josemaria, following the old Roman tradition of enriching the house-fronts in this way. In 1957, when this part of the building was being finished, the founder of Opus Dei asked for a Roman-style *Madonella* to be set there, with a shelf underneath where flowers and candles could be placed. In that way everyone who went past could pray for Our Lady’s protection. In Rome’s Piazza delle Cinque Lune, there is an edicola with a little door for people to have access to it from inside the building. Saint Josemaria thought that this method was very practical, since it enables the picture to be cleaned and looked after when necessary, and the idea was copied. The representation was done in mosaic, which is hard-wearing and withstands the weather. It is framed in light-colored travertine stone from Tivoli, contrasting with the reddish plaster of the surrounding walls in a way often seen on Roman buildings.

Saint Josemaria’s love for the Blessed Virgin Mary was expressed in this and many other representations of her. As he explained, her children feel this devotion as a real need. He said, “If we look at the world, at the People of God, during this month of May, we will see devotion to our Lady taking the form of many old and new customs practiced with great love. It makes me very happy to see that this devotion is always alive, awakening in Christians a supernatural desire to act as ‘members of God's household’.” (*Christ is Passing By*, 139).



On the front of n. 36 Via di Villa Sacchetti is a representation of Our Lady of Loreto.

Pictures and statues of Our Lady in the streets

An elegant oval medallion representing the Virgin and Child is to be found on a corner of the **Palazzo Chigi**, in Piazza Colonna in the center of Rome. Mary and her Son are sculpted in ivory-white glazed terracotta on a blue background. The large oval, in the style of the Florentine ceramics by Della Robbia, dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century. It has a gilded cornice, adorned with intertwining ribbons and leaves and cherubs' heads, and is supported below by a simple stone bracket carved with acanthus leaves.

Opposite the **Trevi Fountain** is a simple image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, probably dating from the 1700s. It is a bust carved in stone and set within an oval stucco niche, situated between the Via delle Muratte and the Vicolo del Forno. The folds of the tunic and cloak are reminiscent of classical Roman sculpture. The original oil-lamp which, as was customary, illuminated the statue, has been replaced by an electric lamp whose glass cover seeks to imitate tongues of flame.

Piazza della Rotonda, where the Pantheon is situated, is overlooked by a regal picture of Our Lady set in a commanding position. The fresco is a

large one, measuring 1.5 meters by 1 meter, appearing still larger because of the elaborately sculpted frame, which all together takes up almost two floors of the building, from the ground floor to the top of the first floor. The sponsor's name is unknown, but according to the Gregorian land registry (1816-1859), the house was the dwelling of Benigno and Alessandro Giorgi and Vicennio Michele di Rosi.

Iconographical studies, and the existence of an engraving of the picture by Vasi dating from 1775, indicate that the fresco was created in the mid-eighteenth century. The subject-matter is the Immaculate Conception, reinforced by the quotation from the Song of Songs inscribed below the picture: *Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te* ("You are all fair, my love, there is no flaw in you"). The picture follows traditional representations of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception: dressed in a blue robe, her hands folded on her breast, she stands on the globe of the world, with the moon and a serpent beneath her feet. Devotion to the Immaculate Conception of Mary was widespread in Rome long before 1854 when Pope Pius IX proclaimed it as a dogma of the Faith.

11. St John Lateran

During the first centuries, because of persecutions, celebration of the Eucharist and instruction in the faith took place in private houses, which some Christian families – usual those who were better off and whose houses were therefore larger – placed at the disposal of the Church. These were the early house churches, which in Rome are also called *tituli* – "titles".



The *titulus* or title was a wooden tablet that hung at the entrance to Roman villas, bearing the name of the owner; the household was also called after the gens or family to which the owner belonged.

With the passage of time, many domus ecclesiae (house churches of this kind) ended up being donated to the Church. When freedom of worship was finally granted, Christian churches were built on those venerated sites, whose history went back to apostolic times in some cases, and to famous Roman martyrs in others. From the fourth century onwards, each of these early house churches was dedicated to a saint. In many cases, this was the first owner of the house, who had given not just the house but his or her own life for the faith.

By mapping the “tituli” that are mentioned in some ancient documents, it is possible to see where Christians were living in 3rd-century Rome. The oldest are the “Titulus Clementis” (the church of San Clemente today), the “Titulus Anastasiae” (Santa Anastasia), the “Titulus Byzantis” (Santi Giovanni e Paolo, on the Celian Hill) the “Titulus Equitii” (Santi Silvestro e Martino ai Monti, on the Esquiline Hill), the “Titulus Chrysogoni” (San Crisogono, in Trastevere), the “Titulus Sabinae” (Santa Sabina, on the Aventine Hill), the “Titulus Gaii” (Santa Susanna), the “Titulus Crescentianae” (San Sisto Vecchio), and the “Titulus Pudentis” (Santa Pudenziana). These nine “Tituli” go back to the origins of Christianity in Rome, and there are another three that date from the end of the third century: the “Titulus Callisti” (the church of Santa Maria in Trastevere),

the “Titulus Caeciliae” (Santa Cecilia), and the “Titulus Marcelli” (San Marcello al Corso).

It has been calculated that before the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 there were more than twenty “Tituli” or house churches in Rome. By that time about one-third of the city’s population had been converted to Christianity, but this fact had as yet left no mark on the architecture of Rome, since the Church was not a legal entity. The Emperor Constantine, as well as publicly authorizing Christian worship, sponsored the building of the first Christian basilicas, both in Rome and in Jerusalem.

A noble race of people

The first Christian church to be built in Rome was the Basilica of St John Lateran, on a site that had previously been occupied by the barracks of the Imperial Guards. From then until the fourteenth-century exile in Avignon, this Basilica was the residence of the Popes and the Cathedral of Rome. Accordingly, it was given the title *“Omnium Urbis et Orbis Ecclesiarum Mater et Caput”* – “Mother and Head of all the churches in the City and in the world”, as the inscription at the entrance says.



The dome of the Baptistery.

Originally this church was called the Basilica of the Saviour, but in the Middle Ages it was also dedicated to St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist. It was consecrated by Pope Sylvester in 318 AD, although

the construction was not completed until several decades later. Since then it has been rebuilt several times after sacking, earthquakes and fires. The present structure dates from the mid-seventeenth century and was designed by Borromini, though the façade and apse underwent later transformations.

A little apart from the Basilica, in the right-hand corner of the great Piazza San Giovanni, stands an ancient octagonal building, plain but elegant in design. This is the Baptistery, which was built in the fifth century during the pontificate of Sixtus III, on the site of an earlier one built by the Emperor Constantine.



On the interior walls, five frescos represent scenes from Constantine's life, including the apparition of the Holy Cross with the promise "in hoc signo vinces" (in this sign you will conquer), which tradition tells us occurred while the Emperor was encamped with his army in the area of Saxa Rubra, on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in which Constantine defeated Maxentius.

In the middle of the Baptistery is the circular pool in which Christian catechumens were baptized by immersion, surrounded by eight porphyry pillars with Ionic and Corinthian capitals.

These pillars support an architrave inscribed with some Latin verses attributed to Pope St Sixtus III (432-440), which admirably summarize Christian teaching on Baptism. They sound so magnificent that it is worth reading them in the original Latin. A translation follows the Latin tex.t

Inscription on the Architrave of the Lateran Basilica:

GENS SACRANDA POLIS HIC SEMINE NASCITVR ALMO
QVAM FECVNDATIS SPIRITVS EDIT AQVIS
VIRGINEO FETV GENITRIX ECCLESIA NATOS
QVOS SPIRANTE DEO CONCIPIT AMNE PARIT
COELORVM REGNVM SPERATE HOC FONTE RENATI
NON RECIPIT FELIX VITA SEMEL GENITOS
FONS HIC EST VITAE QVI TOTVM DILVIT ORBEM
SVMENS DE CHRISTI VVLNERE PRINCIPIVM
MERGERE PECCATOR SACRO PVRGANTE FLVENTO
QVEM VETEREM ACCIPIET PROFERET VNDA NOVVM
INSONS ESSE VOLENS ISTO MVNDARE LAVACRO
SEV PATRIO PREMERIS CRIMINE SEV PROPRIO
NVLLA RENASCENTVM EST DISTANTIA QVOS FACIT VNVM
VNVS FONS VNVS SPIRITVS VNA FIDES
NEC NVMERVS QVEMQVAM SCELERVM NEC FORMA SVORVM
TERREAT HOC NATVS FLVMINE SANCTVS ERIT

Here is born a people of noble race, destined for Heaven,whom the Spirit brings forth in the waters he has made fruitful.
Mother Church conceives her offspring by the breath of God, and bears them virginally in this water.
Hope for the Kingdom of Heaven, you who are reborn in this font.
Eternal life does not await those who are only born once.
This is the spring of life that waters the whole world, Taking its origin from the Wounds of Christ.
Sinner, to be purified, go down into the holy water. It receives the unregenerate and brings him forth a new man.
If you wish to be made innocent, be cleansed in this pool, whether you are weighed down by original sin or your own.

There is no barrier between those who are reborn and made one by the one font, the one Spirit, and the one faith.
Let neither the number nor the kind of their sins terrify anyone; Once reborn in this water, they will be holy.

Apostles of apostles

By Baptism, all Christians are called to holiness and apostolate. The inscription on the Lateran Baptistery shows a keen awareness of this fact in the early Christians. This is why St Josemaria explained the spirit of Opus Dei by comparing it to the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by the simple and sublime fact of their Baptism. (1)

In the first centuries of Christianity, those being received into the Church were baptized by triple immersion, in honor of the Blessed Trinity, in the pool in the Baptistery, and for the whole of the following week they wore a white garment, to signify that, now that their soul had been purified in the baptismal waters, they did not wish to stain it again with sin. If they had the misfortune to fall, they went contritely to the Sacrament of Penance. But how great their desire for holiness, and how far they were from a merely negative struggle! They were happy to have found the Truth and Good – the Love of God – , and they also desired, very naturally, to go to God in the company of many other people: relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. They announced the Gospel joyfully and the Lord made their labors fruitful; but, as we know, spreading the message of salvation often meant risking their lives or enduring serious persecution. Despite all this, the early Christians were not stopped by the obstacles. When St Peter and St John had been warned by the authorities to keep quiet, they had replied, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard!" (2) These words seem to ring out again and again, in the attitudes and deeds of the early Christians.



Interior of the pool for baptism by immersion.

Today, like then, the baptized have the task of working to bring the message of salvation to all people, throughout the whole world. (3) Accordingly, as Christians, we should not only try to do apostolate ourselves, but should also encourage our friends to become apostles in their turn, and commit their lives to the marvelous task of bringing souls to Christ.

“Each of you must try to be an apostle of apostles”, (4) wrote St Josemaria in *The Way*. God is counting on every single Christian to work for “all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (5) And it is vital for all the baptized to become fully aware of their calling to holiness and apostolate. When they do, they can bring true happiness to many people, and they themselves are very happy, because they fill every human reality with Christian meaning and hope. As St Josemaria said, “Through Baptism we are made bearers of the word of Christ, a word which soothes, enkindles and reassures the wounded conscience. For Our Lord to act in us and for us, we must tell him that we are ready to struggle each day, even though we realize we are feeble and useless, and the heavy burden of our personal shortcomings and weakness weighs down upon us. We must tell him again and again that we trust in him and in his help: if necessary, like Abraham, hoping ‘against all hope’. Thus we will go about our work with renewed vigor, and we will teach others how to live free from worry, hatred, suspicion, ignorance, misunderstandings and pessimism, because God can do everything.”(6).

Notes

1. St Josemaria Escrivá, *Conversations*, 24.
2. Acts 4:20.
3. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3.
4. St Josemaria, *The Way*, 920.
5. 1 Tim 2:4.
6. St Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 210.